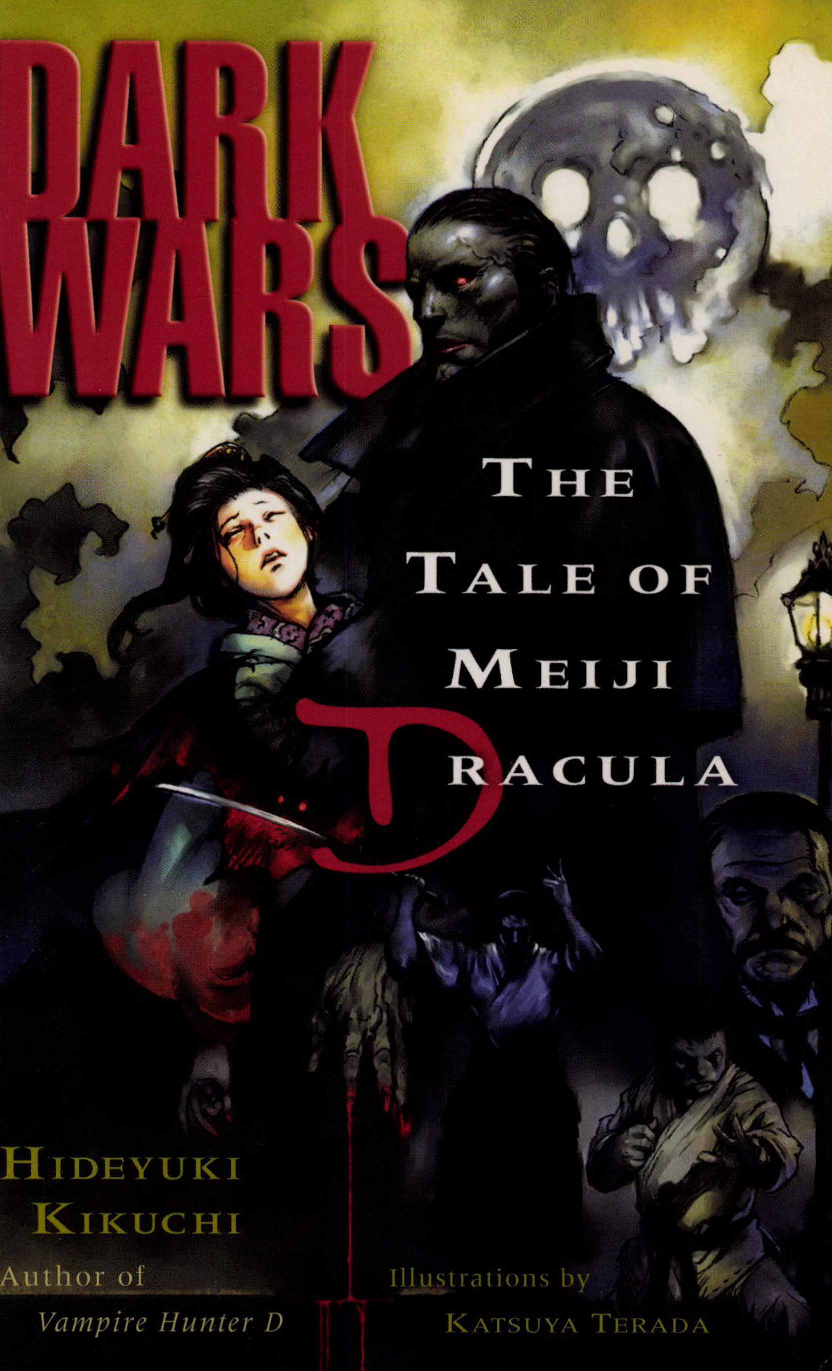

DARK WARS

THE TALE OF MEIJI DRACULA

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DARK WARS

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The Tale of Meiji Dracula

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TRANSLATED BY Mini Eda

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DARK WARS

Chapter One

OUT OF THE DARK WATERS

1

September 20, 188–, 1:13 A.M.
Tokyo

At dusk, as if it were the work of a sorcerer, a fog had appeared and filled all Tokyo. It was now well into night, and the fog had yet to clear.

The flames from the gas lamps along the Ginza's streets were blurred by the fog but still penetrated the darkness and, like so many stars in the galaxy, pulsed. It gave the city a romantic air, enchanting to young couples. But the fog was also so thick several people had been run over by carriages or trampled by horses. And, ominously, bats flew about here and there.

"It feels like something foul is about to happen."

"Yeah."

The two men stood on the wharf that overlooked Tokyo Bay, where they watched the bats fluttering around them. The men, Yashichi and Sansuke, were dockworkers.

Nearby was a hut where poor laborers could spend the night. Although the board was free, the stay was limited to two nights in order to discourage loafers.

As usual, the hut was badly overcrowded, so Yashichi and Sansuke had found themselves squeezed out with no place to sleep. Without the money even for sake, they wandered along the bay and resolved to find both room and employment the very next day.

Ten feet ahead was the edge of the wharf and, beyond that, the black water. In the distance, ships of various sizes were anchored, but they faded unseen into the darkness and fog.

At the boundary where the bay ended and the ocean began stood a lonely lighthouse. Its beacon was barely perceptible. The sound of waves crashing against the wharf cast gloom over the spirits of the two men. Dozens of Japanese sailing vessels and foreign steamships were anchored in the bay, but they were all hidden by darkness and fog.

"Edo sure has changed," Yashichi said grimly, looking around.

Born in 1839, Yashichi had grown up at a time when the Edo shogunate was still a strong presence.

One day he had been told, "This city is no longer called Edo. Starting today, this is Tokyo." However, he had never quite adjusted to the change. "Those country bumpkins from Satsuma and Chôshu are having their way with this city. On top of that, redheaded and blue-eyed foreigners from across the ocean are invading our shores. What do they want, anyway?"

"Trade. They want to trade," said Sansuke somewhat irritably. He was ready to turn in for the night. "People are saying this country has treasures that we don't even know about. Otherwise, why would the foreigners bother to come all this way?"

"What treasures?"

"Well, like gold and silver. And silk."

"Hmm . . . You know, Sansuke, I have a funny feeling."

"What do you mean?"

"So the government signed all those treaties, one after the next, and ever since then plenty of foreigners from America and England have come here. I can't help but wonder if a strange one snuck in along with them."

"A strange one?"

Yashichi suddenly pulled back. An enormous bat had nearly clipped his head. "Damn!" He swatted at it, but the winged creature quickly disappeared. The distraction gone, Yashichi resumed, "When I see them walking around the city, they remind me of the old haunted house in Asakusa. Granted, they don't look anything like the One-Eyed Boy or a ghost. But I see them standing on the street or in an alley, and Edo begins to look like a completely different world."

Sansuke laughed. "You talk about foreigners like they're monsters or something."

"What I'm trying to say is . . . maybe some of them are."

"Come on. This is the Age of Cultural Enlightenment, as they say. How long do you think it's been since the birth of the Meiji government? All that talk about monsters and ghosts . . . that kind of outdated nonsense belongs to the past."

"That may be true, but that doesn't mean we can keep them from coming here," Yashichi replied. Sansuke was quiet.

Suddenly the night seemed to grow darker, and the fog thickened. Chills ran up the two men's spines.

And then—

Rumbling from behind a row of warehouses was the sound of a coach.

They might have asked who it could be at that time of night, but after their conversation, they just yelped. They hid in the shadows, which could hardly conceal even one man, but the fog and pitch black provided adequate cover.

A black coach, drawn by four horses, tore through the fog. The horses were black, and the driver, who wielded a whip, was also clad in black from head to toe.

The coach sped recklessly toward the edge of the wharf.

Was it going to fall in?

The moment the two men closed their eyes, the coach veered sharply and came to an abrupt halt parallel with the wharf's edge. Only the panting and snorting of the horses could be heard, but even that subsided after a moment, and all was quiet. The driver sat motionless.

It was very strange.

"What's that coach doing here?" whispered Sansuke.

"I don't know. But it looks like the driver's waiting for something. He's looking out at the ocean."

"Huh?"

They squinted, but there was nothing in the bay but darkness and fog.

In any case, no ship ever came into port so late at night, and were such a ship expected, a crowd would have gathered. Only the black coach waited in the darkness.

There was a sudden gust of wind. The thick fog lifted, and now the beacon from the lighthouse could be seen.

And so could something else.

"A ship?"

"Couldn't be . . . How?" They shrieked, but fortunately the driver did not seem to hear them.

Next to the wharf, where only moments ago nothing had been visible, was a gray vessel with large masts and an enormous smokestack.

It wasn't a passenger vessel. Perhaps it was a freighter. Even though the ship had appeared in a most mysterious fashion, it was apparent that it had arrived from a distant country.

However, the dockworkers noticed something unnatural.

"Isn't it odd . . . ?"

"Yeah."

No matter how strong the wind, it was customary for a ship to blow its whistle or ring its bell to celebrate its safe return to dry land. The deck should have been alive with the footsteps and voices of the crew.

However, the gray ship was completely devoid of such activity. It was pitch-dark: not a single ray of light emanated from the bridge or from the windows.

"No one's talking, and no one's out on the deck." Yashichi's voice was quivering. "They're probably all dead."

"Don't be stupid." Sansuke looked as if he were about to cry.

A door creaked open.

"Someone's coming out!"

A shadowy figure appeared on deck. His face was concealed, but they could make out that he wore a cape.

Without a sound, the shadow approached the exit and floated off the ship.

"Huh?"

Before they could blink, he was already standing on the wharf ten feet below where he had just been.

The driver had gotten off the coach and was now standing on the wharf. After bowing respectfully, the driver gestured toward the coach.

Without a word, the shadowy figure began to walk.

From his gait to his stature, he had a kind of presence that impressed Yashichi and Sansuke and had them cowering in terror. Most samurai would pale in comparison. He was clearly no ordinary man. But why had such a man arrived on a cargo ship in the middle of the night?

As the man boarded the coach, he turned his head in the direction of the two dockworkers.

His eyes were two crimson orbs.

Before the two terror-stricken men had time to react, the shadowy figure disappeared inside the coach. The driver cracked the whip, the four horses kicked into a gallop, and then the coach was gone.

Thus, on this early autumn night, before two random passersby, a mysterious figure had appeared out of the dark waters. And then, like a curtain being lowered on a stage, the black fog descended once again and covered the city.

2

September 20, 188–, 4:00 A.M.

Lower Niban-chô, Kôjimachi Ward, Tokyo

Although, like the water, the sky was turning brighter, a thin haze still hung over the city. The only people who were awake were the guards and the doctors on duty at the military hospital in Hayabusa District.

During the Edo period, Kôjimachi Ward had been the center of the feudal government, with Edo Castle as both its political center and physical hub; the castle was surrounded by the residences of various feudal lords and samurai. The only part of town where commoners lived had been along the streets connecting Hanzômon and Yotsuya called the Kôjimachi.

Now the Imperial Palace had replaced Edo Castle, and government and military buildings—the Ministry of Military Affairs—stood where once the feudal residences had been situated like a ring of satellites around the castle.

The Ministry of Finance was in Ootemachi 1-chome; the Ministry of Education in Ootemachi 2-chome; and the Ministry of Justice and the Daishin-in (the current Supreme Court) in the Yaesu area. Owing to financial constraints, most of these offices had simply moved into the old feudal residences.

However, there was a section of Kôjimachi that had largely been unaffected by the tidal wave of political change. Although it was surrounded by Yasukuni Shrine in Shinmitsuke to the north, the British legation in Goban-chô to the east, and by the Executive Court and Prince Kawanomiya Kitashira's majestic estate to the south, the residents of this humble part of town remained untouched by the upheaval and continued to live peacefully.

A youth ran down Lower Niban-chô, where

single-story row houses lined the street for blocks. Even given his pace, he didn't appear to be rushing to get anywhere in particular. As indicated by his white uniform, he was, in fact, in training—he was a martial arts student.

Usually his run, which began at the dojo and then continued along the street, was part of his training regimen. But ten days ago, he had found another reason to run aside from just building his endurance.

Glancing at the entrance of one of the row houses, the youth continued north for another thousand feet or so and passed through the gates of a moss-covered temple on his left. Deep within the spacious grounds, he spotted the young man dressed in a white top and blue *hakama*. The young man stood in a stance that seemed to beckon to him.

Since the start of the Meiji era, the new government, eager to catch up to Western ways, had neglected the sword, which it regarded as a symbol of the old ways. So for ten years, the way of the sword had seen a steady decline, until finally people had begun to rediscover the virtues of the past, and training halls started to spring up again here and there.

But this young man who stood with his sword beside the clear pond seemed to be from a different world.

The new type of kendo had adopted a bamboo sword—not even a wooden one—as its principal weapon. And the new fashion demanded that the head, torso, and hands be covered in protective gear. And thus had kendo ceased to be a martial art and become merely a sport.

But the sword that this young man held was real.

Although the darkness lingered, it was morning. There was light, and the blade gleamed as if it had absorbed the light. The youth in the white uniform trembled. He did not feel afraid. He trembled with the excitement one feels when confronted by another, equally formidable warrior.

3

By 1876, the Sword Abolishment Act had already been issued, and the best efforts of down-and-out samurai to again begin practicing the way of the sword resulted in only a modest revival that quickly faded. These days, few men were willing to dedicate themselves entirely to the art of swordsmanship. And awareness of class differences, which had been deeply rooted in the minds of both samurai and commoners, was dissipating and might soon be forgotten.

And yet, in such a world, here was a young man who, so early in the morning, was practicing with his sword.

To the youth in the white uniform, it was as if he were seeing a real samurai, just as he had known them in his childhood.

The movements of the young swordsman had not changed. He continued to swing the sword up and down. That was all. And, as his sword sliced through the air in a precise arc, he was a handsome and commanding figure. Even an amateur could see that he was no ordinary swordsman.

The youth in the uniform stared as if he were watching a beautiful woman.

"Shirô-kun."

Suddenly he snapped out of his trance. He had been so mesmerized by the swordsman's skill that he did not notice that the young man had stopped and was now looking at him.

"I'm sorry, Daigo-san. I didn't mean to interrupt your training."

Shirô scratched his head. Although Daigo was only a year older, he looked so much more mature than Shirô. Perhaps it was a difference in mental training.

But speaking of differences, there was another noticeable one.

As the sun grew brighter, it tinted Shirô's face with a rosy hue, but Daigo remained as pale as a wax figure. Compared to Shirô's ruddy countenance, Daigo's handsome, chiseled features could almost be described as chilling. Thus, it wasn't just his skill with the sword Shirô had been drawn to.

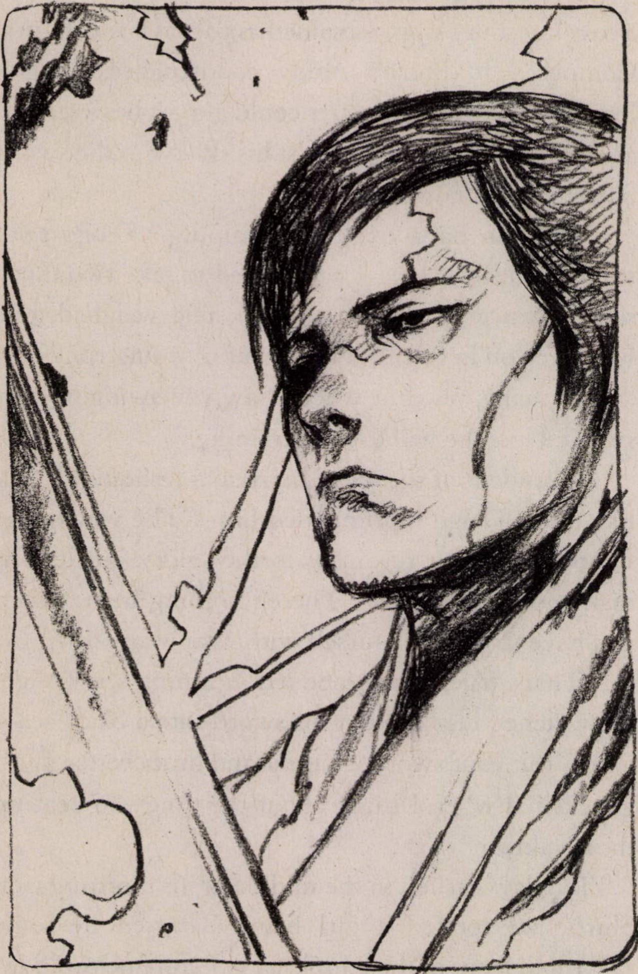
"You can hardly call this training," Daigo said, smiling faintly. "A year ago, I used to take two thousand practice swings with a stick that weighed four *kan*. Are you in the middle of your morning run?"

"Actually, yes. But when I saw you swinging that sword, I lost the will to keep training."

"A student of the 'new' martial arts shouldn't talk like that," Daigo reprimanded him. "The way of the sword may never regain its former glory, but judo is really going to flourish. There's nothing better when you have to protect yourself without a weapon."

"That's true." Shirô nodded, beaming with pride. He watched his hero put his sword into a black scabbard. "But your sword is a thousand times better. I still get excited when I think about the time you beat up those yakuza."

Ten days earlier, in the middle of his morning run, Shirô had spotted a girl being harassed by some yakuza in front of the temple gate. Before he could intervene, Daigo had appeared with his bamboo sword.



At six shaku, Daigo was much taller than Shirô, who was barely five shaku, but the yakuza had underestimated the young man with the pretty face.

With one swing of his sword, Daigo had made the yakuza lose the will to fight.

By the time Shirô had joined the battle, every yakuza's arm had been broken. And it had been done with a bamboo sword, not a wooden one. Usually a hard blow with a bamboo sword might raise a bruise or, at best, cause some swelling. *But this man might be able to cut off an arm with a wooden sword. What might he do with a* real *sword?*

Without a word, the yakuza had run away. Ignoring the girl who thanked him, Daigo had gone back inside the temple. Shirô had run after him and could only blurt out, "Amazing!" From that day on, they had entered into a relationship—one that might be more meaningful than mere friendship.

"Enough about me. How is the dojo?"

"Well, Sensei Kanô is busy out and about as usual, but Tomida is holding down the fort. We are accepting more and more students every day."

"That's great. I'm sure you'll be even busier from now on."

"Yes." Shirô puffed out his chest a little with pride. He was a young man, not yet sixteen, and driven by passion and dreams. Remembering who he was talking to, he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to brag. Um, how is your mother?"

"Oh, she's fine." Daigo smiled. Shirô was too innocent to notice the sadness in his smile or voice.

"That's great." Shirô beamed. Even the usually reserved Daigo was defenseless against Shirô's cheerfulness.

"Let's quit for today. My mother has been asking about you. Do you want to stop by?"

"Um, sure." It was actually so that he could see Daigo that Shirô had changed his route. He rationalized that he would make up for cutting his run short by training three times as hard back at the dojo.

He followed Daigo, who carried his belongings wrapped in a green cloth. It was only a ten-minute walk to the row houses on Lower Niban-chô. Along the way, past the low roofs of the row houses, Shirô spotted the roof of what appeared to be a European-style mansion.

"What's that?" It was a question Shirô had always wanted to ask.

"A house that belonged to a British trading company up until a year ago. It's unoccupied now," Daigo said indifferently.

Daigo and his mother lived in one of the hundred-year-old houses that lined the block in clusters of ten. They shared a dirt entryway and two six-tatami mat rooms, which was just enough space for two people.

"I'm back." Daigo slid open the wooden door.

The woman grilling fish in the corner of the entryway looked up and replied, "Oh, hello."

Her plain kimono and white hair could not conceal this woman's fundamental beauty and good manners. During his other visits, Shirô had seen the neighborhood women pass by and stare in a way that went well beyond jealousy.

This was Daigo's mother, Minazuki Sayo.

"Oh, Saigô-dono. You have good timing. Please have breakfast with us."

"Oh, no, thank you," Shirô refused, waving a hand emphatically. "I just stopped by during my morning run to watch Daigo-san training. I can't stay long."

"Come, I insist."

Sayo's smile was genuine. As a daughter of a vassal who had been loyal to the shogunate to the end, she had always liked Shirô, who himself was the son of an Aizu samurai; and Shirô knew this. Which was why he didn't want to burden her. Where she and Daigo lived spoke volumes about their circumstances.

Although he refused, she insisted that she could not allow a guest in her home to leave without so much as a cup of tea. Shirô finally accepted her offer of tea, but decided he could not eat breakfast, not in the middle of his morning training.

Just when he stepped into the main house, he heard a girl's scream outside.

The neighborhood women could be heard yelling, demanding to know what was going on. Over the women's voices, a gruff male voice yelled at them to shut up and then something about how the child had to work off her parent's debts.

Suddenly Shirô remembered seeing a seven- or eight-year-old girl among the women gossiping by the well.

"Mother." Daigo put a hand on his wooden sword.

"It must be men from Kumasuke, the loan shark. Go on and help her."

Daigo nodded.

"Wait, please," Shirô called out to Daigo, who was heading for the door. "If you go, they'll know to come back here for revenge. I'm an unknown. Will you let me handle this?"

"You may be unknown, but—"

"Please let me out the back way. I'm going to circle around to the entrance."

"But—" Sayo objected.

"Mother, let him handle it," said Daigo, coming to Shirô's aid. "Can't you see? Shirô-kun wants to help someone in danger, but he also wants to test his skills in a real fight. In America, that's called a 'street fight.' "

When Shirô jumped over the fence in the backyard, he heard Sayo exclaim, "Oh!" He had cleared the five-shaku fence in one easy jump.

Scratching his head, he went down the back alley and quickly made his way back through the front entrance, which he had entered only a few minutes earlier.

Over by the well, a sickly man was trying to prevent four burly men from taking a little girl forcibly by the hand. From his pale skin to the collarbone protruding from his pajamas to the gaunt arms and legs to the scraggly stubble on his face, it was clear that the girl's father was very sick.

"I'm begging you. She's only seven!"

The yakuza snorted at the father's pleas. "She can still wait on customers. If you don't like it, give us back the money. Or you can give us her sister. Now, she's a pretty thing! Tell her when she comes back from her trip, to come by—"

That's when they noticed. Turning now to where the yakuza were looking from a distance, they saw Shirô standing only three feet away.

"You a student? What do you want?" asked the yakuza closest to Shirô. He was the biggest of the four burly men. He might have been six shaku and maybe twenty-four kan.

"I was merely passing by when I saw your shameful behavior. Let go of the girl's hand."

"What!" They all drew closer, while remaining suspicious of the young man. He looked small and innocent enough, but he carried himself with a calmness that made the men wary.

"Who the hell are you?" asked the biggest yakuza.

"You don't know me. The name is Saigô Shirô."

The four men's eyes could not open any wider. In fact, they knew the name quite well.

"S-so you're Saigô from Kôdôkan. You're the student of that judo stuff people are talking about. This'll be good!" The tall one who had the girl's hand stepped forward. A faint scar ran down his right cheek. Staring coldly down at Shirô, he said, "I used to be a student of Nishida-ryû jujitsu until three, four years ago. I'll take you on!"

"Quit it, Tatsu," the biggest one said somewhat unexpectedly.

"Don't try and stop me. You can't expect me to ignore this kid meddling in our affairs, especially if he really is Saigô from the Kôdôkan dojo. Besides, what are we doing here, if this can be settled by just talking?" Then he turned to Shirô. "Don't you agree?"

"Exactly."

The tall one, Tatsu, laughed, which crinkled the scar on his cheek. "This'll be good! You've got guts, but we'll see how long that lasts. Come and get me!" Slipping out of his sandals, he raised his right hand high above his head and bent the left in front—taking the impenetrable water tiger stance of the Nishida-ryû.

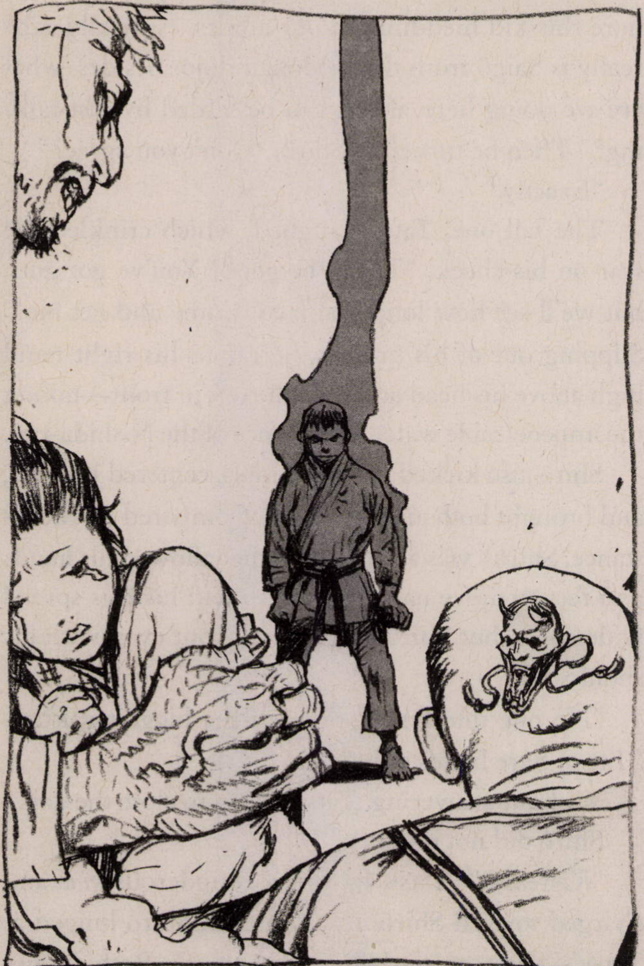
Shirô also kicked off his sandals, centered his hips, and brought both arms forward. Compared to Tatsu's stance, Shirô's was a simple one that allowed his hands and feet to move naturally. Tatsu had his legs spread wide apart, but Shirô's legs were about even with his shoulders.

"No one interferes," ordered the biggest yakuza. "Tatsu. Bare hands only."

Without answering, Tatsu began to close the gap.

Shirô did not move.

"Kiyyehhh!" Tatsu let out a thunderous *kiai* and charged toward Shirô. In an instant, Shirô lunged at Tatsu's chest at ten times the speed. Both bodies pitched forward.



No one heard a *kiai.* Only a sharp exhalation of breath.

Then everyone saw the tall man sailing through the air.

4

His body fell toward the stone ground. His bones would surely break!

The air froze. The women shut their eyes.

But the sound that followed was quieter than expected. Something had slowed Tatsu's fall. With nearly superhuman speed, Shirô had put his foot between Tatsu and the stone ground, thereby cushioning his fall. It was only because of Shirô that Tatsu landed on the ground so gently.

"Whoa!" exclaimed the biggest yakuza admiringly.

Then a different man darted out toward Shirô. His right hand was cocked at his hip. A blade gleamed in the sunlight.

"You damned idiot!" yelled the biggest yakuza.

But Shirô had already moved to the side with unbelievable quickness. The yakuza would have succeeded only in stabbing Shirô's shadow.

The momentum carried the yakuza forward, and he yelped as he ended up on the ground next to Tatsu.

Even then, he managed to regain his feet almost immediately, burning to get revenge for the humiliation.

Shirô grimaced. "Bastard."

The yakuza charged again, and in the next instant, he spun a tight circle in the air and fell to the ground on his back. This time, there was an unpleasant sound.

Tatsu grabbed the small blade from the yakuza, who was silently writhing in pain, then hid it in his sleeve and bowed his head to Shirô.

"Sorry." It had been Tatsu who had the thrown the yakuza. "He thought we'd lose face as businessmen. Give him a break."

"Of course," Shirô answered cheerfully.

"You're a pretty understanding kid, but I guess that's to be expected from Saigô Shirô of the Kôdôkan dojo," said the biggest yakuza.

"Hey." He motioned for another man to help the fallen yakuza up. "Out of respect to you, we'll leave for today. But this isn't over. If you can't pay off your debt, then you or someone else in the family has to work it off. That's just the way the world works. Isn't that right, Tetsugorô?"

Tetsugorô, who held his daughter in his arms, was speechless.

"We'll be back tomorrow. So get it figured out. Let's go." The big man turned to go.

"Hey," said Tatsu.

Everyone, including the onlookers, turned to see what Tatsu was staring at. It was Daigo, who was standing among the group of women.

"You must be that young swordsman. I heard you beat up some of our men a while ago. No hard feelings, really. You broke a man's bones with a bamboo sword . . . impressive. Plus I heard you were protecting a young lady. You're quite the samurai." Tatsu flashed an intimidating grin. "I'll see you around."

With that, he followed the other men, who'd already gone.

Shirô relaxed into his natural stance. The expressions of Tatsu and the others, who were clearly impressed by his abilities, were indelibly etched in his mind.

When the four men were out of sight, everyone clamored around Shirô.

"You're something else!"

"First time I've ever seen that. There is a God!"

Daigo also came to Shirô's side and said, "That was well done. Was that *yama arashi*?" He still gripped the wooden sword, which he had planned to use if Shirô was in danger.

"No, that was just a shoulder throw."

"Whatever it was, it was amazing. I was prepared to step in at the first sign of trouble, but you could probably toss ten, twenty guys like that pretty easily."

"Stop, please. I'm embarrassed," Shirô protested earnestly. He watched the father and daughter bowing repeatedly in his direction as they retreated into their house. "I should be going now."

"You tea is ready."

"No, now that I'm back in the mood, I should really get back to training. I shouldn't slack off. I must go."

"Okay." Daigo made no attempt to stop him.

Judo and kendo: different martial arts, but both boys were prodigies in their discipline. Daigo knew what Shirô was feeling.

After seeing Shirô off, Daigo went back home.

When he reported what had happened, at first, a sad expression came over Sayo's face.

"That sounds like Shirô-san. It's further proof that the martial arts are not dead in this country," she said, getting over her sadness. "How are you feeling?" Her mood darkened again.

"I feel good today."

"Is that so . . ." Her voice sounded relieved, but the way she continued to look at her son revealed an unshakable fear. "I understand your training is important to you, but please don't overdo it."

"Don't worry."

After he and his mother finished eating breakfast together, Daigo said, "I'm going to the dojo."

Daigo was the head instructor at Renbei-jyuku in neighboring Kanda Ward on Minami Kôga-chô.

"You didn't eat very much. Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"Don't worry about me, please."

For a while, Sayo stared at the door, after it had closed behind him.

Suddenly she felt a sharp pain in her stomach.

The pain felt as though her insides were being wrung out of her. She fell to her knees and tried to endure it. Finally, the pain subsided.

Her beautiful face was dripping with sweat.

What will happen to us now?

She could not help but utter the words her son had insisted time and again she never say: "If only your father were here."

"Iyyehh! Tsuahh! Toahh!"

It was the sound of *kiai.* This primal yell would make most men tremble, especially coming from a large, hairy man in his thirties who was brimming with energy and spirit. However, his opponent, who was standing in *seigan* stance a mere two *ken* from him, did not even flinch.

It was Daigo. Although he could not be considered slender by any standard, his kendo uniform made him look lithe and fast.

Three minutes had passed since face-off. In that time, Otsuka Seiji, also known as one of the school's *Shitennô*, could only *kiai*—he had not made a single move.

He wore headgear and protection around his torso. His opponent wielded not a wooden sword but a bamboo sword. No risk of injury. And yet he could not move. In the past, Otsuka, fourth dan, had faced fifty opponents back-to-back in quick succession and won—twice. Nevertheless, this young man before him, in his basic *seigan* stance, was overwhelming him.

"What's the matter?" Daigo called out. "It isn't much of a match if you don't attack. Come at me. If you don't move, I will."

Daigo waited a moment. When Otsuka did not come, he started to inch forward.

Otsuka stepped back.

"What are you doing, Otsuka?" someone yelled out from among the students who were observing the match. It was one of the *Shitennô,* Norizuki Ryôta, fourth dan.

"You're embarrassing the *Shitennô.* Get him!" This was Nobi Shinsuke, fourth dan, also one of the *Shitennô.*

"Don't fall back. Don't retreat!" The fourth and last member was Daidôji Senkichi.

Daigo had already defeated him and the others, and Otsuka was the last *Shitennô* left. Nobi's voice was so deep and hoarse because he had taken a thrust to the throat.

Otsuka's back was nearly against the wall.

Maintaining the same distance, Daigo stopped.

"Otsuka!"

"Go!"

Encouraged by that voice, Otsuka attacked.

He raised his arms, aiming for the right side of Daigo's head. He didn't see Daigo move or his sword cut the air. Before he had time to be surprised, Otsuka was struck on top of the head with a mighty blow and fell down, unconscious.

Bowing, Daigo said, "Morning practice is over."

As they watched him leave the dojo, the students were so completely shocked that they forgot to bow.

After changing, Daigo went out into the hall, where he was met by Chizuru, the daughter of the dojo head, Kashiwabara Isanosuke.

"My father wants to see you," she said.

Chizuru led the way as she and Daigo crossed the hall and entered the magnificent Isanosuke residence.

After the *go-isshin,* the art of the sword had become a relic of the Old World. However, around 1876, people began to recognize its usefulness for cultivating the mind and body, and so the discipline was renamed kendo and even incorporated into the new school curriculum. Even though swordsmanship had seen this modest revival, the number of dojos did not increase significantly. Few dojo owners enjoyed the kind of affluent lifestyle that the Renbei-jyuku head, Kashiwabara Isanosuke, did; he had earned a three thousand-koku salary during the shogun era. During the conflict between the shogun's and emperor's armies, he had cleverly escaped being attacked by either side. Finally, in the Meiji era, he had skillfully insinuated himself at the center of the new government. After rising quickly through its ranks, Isanosuke was now a member of the House of Peers.

At the same time, he had started Renbei-jyuku with the goal of training young men and women with bright futures. The dojo admitted not only children of government officials but also the children of those formerly loyal to the old government and ordinary citizens. The crack of bamboo and wooden swords echoed through the dojo night and day.

Chizuru led Daigo not into the salon but to Isanosuke's private study. Such a reception was considered special.

Isanosuke was fifty-seven now; he was forty when Chizuru was born. Her older brother and sister, along with their mother, had been killed during the bloody days of the Restoration; so Chizuru had been raised almost entirely by a nurse.

"Chizuru was watching. It seems you did quite a job on the *Shitennô.*" He began the conversation with small talk. It was hard to believe that the enormous man, who was dressed in a kimono, wasn't a successful merchant but instead a politician and a swordsman. But, in fact, Isanosuke was a master of the old-style *Shinkage-ryû* and his name had been renowned in martial arts circles during the last days of the Tokugawa shogunate.

As a maid brought some steaming drinks to the ebony table, Chizuru sat down.

"Coffee," said Isanosuke, raising the green porcelain cup to his lips.

After a sip, he continued, "They are the best out of all the students I trained myself. You would be hard-pressed to find their equals in all Edo—I mean, Tokyo. Unless, of course, they are matched against you, a boy of seventeen. You treat them as if they were mere children. It makes me depressed."

"All the same, a match in the dojo is still a serious match." The sudden sharpness of Daigo's voice made Chizuru sit up straighter.

"Indeed." Isanosuke smiled broadly. Though he had become a member of the House of Peers, the blood of a swordsman still flowed in his veins.

"The *Shitennô* do not complain because they know that as well. Lesser men would have quit this dojo and started their own by now." He paused. "Or they would have killed you."

"As it should be for one who lives by the sword."

This response, which came so quickly, silenced Isanosuke. The words resonated in his soul.

When I was young, a man who lived by the sword thought about nothing but defeating the enemy before him, no matter how many more enemies he might make in the process. Even in this modern age, this boy thinks in the same way.

Isanosuke coughed and began again, "Well, you are in a class by yourself. The students know that, but they also respect the *Shitennô* for who they are, as well . . . which brings me to . . ."

He came to the point of their conversation. Chizuru, who already knew what was coming, was nervous. Daigo did not so much as furrow his brow.

“I have something important to ask you. And I’d like you to say yes.”

Chapter Two

THE MAN IN THE MANSION

1

September 20, 188–, 6:00 P.M.

South Kôga-chô, Kanda Ward, Tokyo

Chizuru accompanied him to the gate of Renbeijyuku. She seemed even more reserved and vulnerable than usual.

And Daigo knew why: he had refused her father's request.

At the gate, he turned to her and said, "Please forgive me."

"No," Chizuru replied. What else was there to say? Tears were rolling down her cheeks. Turning away, she wiped them with the sleeve of her kimono.

Before she could face him again, Daigo excused himself and walked through the gate.

He felt like a villain of the worst kind.

When will she get over her disappointment? he wondered.

After walking several steps down the main street, he heard a cheerful voice calling from behind him. "Sensei Minazuki."

When Daigo turned around, a radiant smile greeted him.

She wore a feather-patterned kimono, a purple hakama that came down to her shoes, and a matching purple ribbon in her hair. Even if she'd been wearing a standard-issue school uniform, Daigo would have been able to recognize her just from her large, catlike eyes.

He was glad to see Akane, Chizuru's younger sister, and most especially Saigô Shirô, who was standing there next to another student from the all-girls school.

Although her older sister did not study the martial arts, Akane had studied the sword at Renbei-jyuku until a year ago and was now training at Kôdôkan dojo. The bundle she carried was probably a judo uniform.

Acknowledging Shirô with a look, Daigo asked Akane, "On your way home?"

"Yes—but not right away," she said suggestively and with a cheerfulness that almost made Daigo smile.

"What are you scheming?"

"You know Charman-san's mansion near your house? We are going there."

"Yes, the mansion owned by the trading company. But that place is—"

"Unoccupied, we know. But someone is moving in tomorrow."

"Oh."

"Please don't answer like you care when you really aren't the least bit interested."

Daigo grimaced. From top to bottom, Akane was the polar opposite of Chizuru, and the way she challenged him just now reminded him of the swing of a sword.

"Well, excuse me, but even though no one has moved in yet, don't you think it's unwise to enter someone's home without permission? And, in the first place, you don't have a key."

"Don't worry about that. Right, Takako-sama?"

It was fashionable among schoolgirls to call each other sama, but such a detail was lost on Daigo. The schoolgirl, who had been staring at Daigo, bowed hastily. Judging by the bundle in her arms, she was also a judo student. She was a plump girl, weighing perhaps twenty kan.

"This is my best friend, Niizuka Takako. Her family is in the real estate brokerage business. Her father was the one who sold the mansion. Takako-sama borrowed the key, and we're going there now."

"Even with the key, you can't just go into someone's house unless you have a good reason." Daigo's tone was harsh.

Akane stuck out her chin and retorted, "We do have a reason."

Daigo glanced at Shirô, whose shoulders were slumped forward, probably a sign that he'd been dragged here reluctantly. Even the head of Kôdôkan dojo, Kanô Jigorô, respected the Kashiwabara name, which probably had something to do with why Shirô was here with Akane.

"First, Takako-sama read the agreement, which said the new resident will not move in until tomorrow. And, furthermore, there is a painting by the famous French artist Millet in that house."

"Millet?"

"Ah, it seems the art world is completely foreign to someone who just swings a sword all day. In all Japan, there exists only one painting by this famous man."

"Oh, let *me* explain!" Niizuka Takako cut in, pushing Akane aside. Akane staggered back. Takako seemed better suited to sumo than judo.

"It's like this." Looking up at Daigo longingly, the plump girl began to explain, as spittle flew from her thick lips.

According to her account, the mansion had once belonged to a British trader named Charman, who was also in the art and antiques business. Millet had died in 1875. While his paintings, depicting the daily lives of farmers, had not been big sellers during his lifetime, he had won praise from people in the art world even twenty years before his death. Five years before that, Charman had been on business in Barbizon, an artists' retreat, and heard about Millet through a business associate, and so Charman visited Millet at his home.

However, it seemed the businessman did not have an eye to recognize the value of the paintings. If he had, he might have bought much more than a single painting for one hundred francs.

Charman hung the painting in his Japanese mansion; and it was during a visit with her father that Takako had first seen it.

Later, there was a failed business venture in Europe from which Charman could not recover, and he went bankrupt. He forfeited the mansion, along with the Millet painting. He had been so busy trying to recover what he had lost that he had heard nothing of Millet's sudden and meteoric rise to fame. Perhaps Charman was never really meant for the art business.

And now a painting by Millet, whom the French had acknowledged as a genius, hung on a wall in a mansion that would be unoccupied for only one more day.

"Takako-sama told me the story two days ago. I appreciate art, Sensei Minazuki. It must be the art gods who have given us the opportunity to see this painting. Of course, we won't lay a finger on it, just look at it. That is only proper."

"Is that so? Well, good-bye."

Daigo bowed and was turning to leave, when Akane hastily said, "Sensei, where are you going?"

"I'm going home. Try not to make a mess of the mansion."

"Wait, we need you to come with us!"

Daigo kept walking.

"The ghost of Charman might appear!"

Daigo stopped and turned around. Looking at Shirô quietly, he said, "You have *him* for that. There isn't anyone more reliable in all Tokyo."

"Judo doesn't work on ghosts."

"Neither does kendo."

"Charman-san hanged himself in the room where the painting is. Are you going to let two girls go into such a place?"

"But you're the ones who want to go there."

Akane searched for an answer and retorted, "What if it's not a ghost? What if there's a vagrant with a knife, or a robber? What if there are ten of them? Sensei Saigô, say something, please."

Shirô was caught off guard by her demands. Even the judo prodigy was no match for the free-spirited tomboy.

Daigo grimaced.

"Minazuki-san—"

Daigo stopped him from making a formal plea. "Fine, I'll go. But as a favor to a friend."

The girls exchanged grimaces but said nothing.

The mansion looked more frightening by the minute. Not even a year had passed since it had been abandoned, and yet everything about it was ominous—the ivy climbing the walls, the withered garden.

And the remaining rays of sunlight would soon turn blue.

Using the key that Takako had brought, they opened the iron gate and let themselves in. Before reaching the entrance, the foursome stopped to look around.

"Something is strange," Takako said fearfully, keeping her voice low. "It didn't look this scary the last time I came. Even with no one here and the yard full of weeds—"

Looking down at the ground, Shirô asked, "Niizuka-san, are you sure you have the date right? Look there. Wheel tracks in the dirt."

They also found hoofprints in addition to the four lines made by the wheels of a carriage.

"Then somebody . . . ?"

Akane could not help furrowing her brow, but she was quick to think positively again. "That's all right. If the new resident is already here, we can just ask him if he'll show us the painting."

Shirô replied wearily, "I don't think anyone is here. The gate was chained shut, not to mention there are no lights on, even though it's getting dark."

"Fine. Then let's proceed as planned."

There was no bell to ring, and, although they knocked, there was no answer.

"It doesn't seem like anybody's home. Let's let ourselves in."

Takako unlocked the door. The mansion was sunk in darkness.

"Sensei Saigô. A light please."

Shirô produced a match and candle and lit it.

"Go on inside. Saigô-kun, after them," Daigo suggested.

However, Akane refused, "In these situations, aren't the men supposed to go first?"

Shirô tried not to laugh. "Agreed. Then I shall go first."

The entrance hall was spacious but empty. The tables, chairs, cabinets, and lamps had all been cleared out.

Takako reported that the stairs were on the left and that straight ahead was the living room.

"The windows haven't been opened in a while. It smells moldy in here," Akane said, looking all around. "The curtains are closed. Those curtains—"

"Weren't here before," Takako finished, nodding.

Shirô tilted his head a bit. "That would mean that the new owner came to hang some curtains without bothering to open the windows to let in some fresh air, then left. That is strange."

A mystery. They couldn't figure out why anyone would do that.

Akane pointed to the door tucked away to the right side of the staircase. "That's the way to the living room. Right, Takako-sama?"

"Yes."

"Let's go, everyone."

Shirô led the way and opened the door.

The smell of mold assaulted them. The smell was far worse here than in the hall, where at least some fresh air could seep in through the entrance.

"Where is the painting?"

"The wall over there." Takako pointed to the left.

"Sensei Saigô," Akane urged.

Shirô started forward.

The wall and the edge of the frame slowly came into view.

But then they realized that the illumination from the candle was too faint.

"Will someone open the window?" Akane said, her voice rising with excitement.

Setting the candle on the floor, Shirô headed for the window. The curtain opened. It appeared there was some traces of daylight left. Bluish light streamed into the empty room.

And at last, they saw the painting.

"Ohhh!"

The voices were filled with shock and dismay, and they belonged to Akane and Takako.

The painting was there.

A family of farmers appeared to be on their way to the fields in a horse-drawn carriage.

Even in the gloom, anyone could see that the painting was filled with tenderness and the power to touch people's hearts.

If only there were not a cross-shaped cut in it.

A great painter's precious legacy had been destroyed, and in this very mansion.

"How could it be? . . . Millet's painting . . . his art," said Akane in a daze.

There was the sound of wings fluttering overhead.

Akane screamed and bent over instinctively. The black shadow came down on the nape of her neck.

"Oh!" She screamed again, swatting it away. Shirô held up the candle.

The light from the candle caught what looked like the edge of a black wing. It flew upward.

Chasing after it with the candle, Shirô glanced out of the corner of his eye at Akane, who was till hunched over, her hand covering the right side of her neck.

"It's a bat. Damn you!" Shirô swatted at it with the candle, but the winged creature swooped down and circled around the flame as if to mock him.

In this situation, Shirô's judo skills were of no use.

"Kashiwabara-san, what's wrong?"

"I'm all right," answered Akane.

In the split second that Shirô had let down his guard, the creature flew over the candle and swooped into his line of sight.

Dropping back, he heard a dull sound in front of him.

An enormous bat with a wingspan of two shaku lay lifeless on the floor. Rather than check on Akane, the martial artist in him made Shirô stare at the man who had swung the wooden sword right at his face. It was Daigo.

"Amazing!" he shouted. What Daigo had done was unthinkable.

So confident was Daigo in his skill that he needed only to glance at the bat, and then he motioned toward Akane with his chin, "Go check on her."

Takako was already by her side.

Shirô ran over to her hastily. "Are you all right?"

He brought the candle closer.

Forcing a smile, Akane said, "The bat's claws . . . I'm only bleeding a little."

"That's not good. We have to sterilize it."

Shirô brought the flame even closer.

Akane jumped. "What are you doing?"

"Well, I thought that to sterilize the wound . . ." He looked at Akane's face and realized she was frightened. "Oh, no. I'm sorry."

Judo prodigy or no, he was still a bit scatterbrained.

Then, out of the darkness, a voice rang out, "How you have disappointed this traveler who has only just arrived in your country."

Even Daigo was a slow to turn around. Though it was a human voice, it was so heavy and oppressive that it had chilled him to the bone.

And that was when it became apparent that Shirô had not been the one to open the curtains.

The man stood next to the curtains with his hand still on them. Just outside the window was a balcony, and beyond that was a gnarled tree illuminated in a bluish tint.

"I had heard that the people of this country value courage and decorum. And I knew someone who embodied those qualities."

The four intruders were shocked to discover it was a foreigner who had been speaking such fluent Japanese.

"We're sorry," Akane apologized to the shadow. "We had heard it would be another day before you arrived, and we wanted very much to see the painting."

"A boring picture of farmers."

"Oh, no—"

"We apologize profusely for entering your home without permission." Daigo bowed his head. "My name is Minazuki Daigo. I teach kendo at Renbei-jyuku in South Kôga-chô.

This introduction drew a reaction from the steely-looking figure. "Ah, the decent one in the group. Were you the one who cut down the bat?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"I had thought it possible to cut down a swallow but not a bat. And to kill it instantly with one blow is the mark of a true swordsman. Brilliant."

"Not at all."

"Out of respect for your skill, allow me to introduce myself," said the dark figure. "I am Count Dracula."

2

The shadow stepped forward. The moonlight, which had been obstructed by the curtains, now illuminated the man's face.

It was an eaglelike face, with thick eyebrows that slanted upward; a hooked and protruding nose; glimmering blue eyes; and straight lips, no wider than a slit.

A count . . . His title meant that he was of the nobility, so that one might expect a man who merely lived off the family fortune and attended lavish balls night and day. However, he gave the impression of being an entirely different sort of man.

He had the face of warrior. Not of a practitioner of judo or kendo but of a man who had been attacked many times by swords—and had plunged countless others into the hearts of men.

There was no doubt that here was a man who could cross a river filled with the blood of his victims, while gazing up the moon.

"Um, um, um," Takako said hastily. She was the one who had brought the key. If she wasn't careful, this incident might involve her parents. "I'm sorry. We had heard you would be arriving tomorrow, so . . ."

"The ship arrived early." The count came to the center of the room, as Takako and Akane naturally gave way to his imposing presence. "In any case, I live here now. I'd like you to leave."

"Of course." Daigo bowed. "I apologize again for intruding. We hope to call on you again at another time."

"That won't be necessary," said the count. "I am a recluse. I have but one purpose in coming to this country. I wish to go home quietly just as soon as my business is concluded. I would prefer that you never return."

"I understand," answered Daigo, clearly entranced by this man.

So this is a real European aristocrat. His entire being exuded a power that made Daigo tense. He reminded him of the old samurai of his grandfather's generation that he had heard so much about from his father.

Evidently the girls had the same impression.

As Takako stood captivated, Akane said, "My name is Kashiwabara Akane. I am the daughter of the owner of Renbei-jyuku, where Minazuki-san trains. We have many men and women of noble birth as our friends." Akane had managed to finish without averting her eyes.

Daigo saw the count's lips curl up into a faint smile. That's when he noticed how red his lips were—red like blood.

"Thank you for the lovely greeting. But now you must leave."

It was clear he had no wish to continue the conversation. Daigo headed toward the door, urging a reluctant Akane and Takako to do the same.

Outside, Daigo felt relieved to breathe the night air. Massaging his shoulders, Shirô appeared to be feeling the same way. The two girls, on the other hand, looked behind them several times before passing through the iron gate.

"Akane-san," said Daigo harshly, "this can't happen ever again."

"I know," she said crossly and looked away. "So he arrived earlier than expected, that's all. Next time—"

"There is no next time." His voice sounded so cold, so much like a winter night, that it made even the defiant tomboy gasp. "There is something sinister about that man Dracula. And the mansion seemed strange, too. You mustn't go near that place. Please promise."

It wasn't just Daigo's piercing stare that made her respond obediently. "Okay." She had felt the same way.

Daigo nodded. "You, too, Saigô-kun. If by chance these ladies forget their promise, you have to stop them."

"I understand," said the judo prodigy, scratching his head. He seemed to regret agreeing to accompany the ladies in the first place. But then his face flushed, as he looked at Daigo with excitement and awe.

"But when you cut down that bat with your sword . . . it was amazing! It sent shivers down my spine."

"I didn't cut it."

Shirô realized that Daigo had a wooden sword; it was more accurate to say he had struck the bat, rather than cut it down. But Shirô thought he had clearly seen the glint of a metal sword at that moment. Even the arrogant count had thought Daigo had cut the bat.

"Excuse me," interrupted Takako. "Why is it so amazing to cut down a bat?"

Shirô answered, "Well, you'd know if you tried it yourself, but those bats can never be caught. It's as if they know what you are thinking. They can evade any swing of a stick or just about anything else."

Takako did not seem all that satisfied with this explanation. While it is now widely known that bats emit supersonic waves to detect prey and evade obstacles, people of this period could rely only on what they themselves experienced.

When they reached the street corner, they heard the sound of an approaching carriage. A black coach drawn by four horses appeared and passed them.

Looking behind them, they watched the coach stop in front of the Dracula mansion.

The driver in the black coat nimbly jumped down from the coach and headed for the iron gate.

"Let's go." Akane urged them around the corner, perhaps embarrassed by the whole incident. "Takako-san, what's wrong?"

The pudgy girl continued to stare at the carriage.

"Hey?" Akane prompted again.

After a while, Takako shook her head and finally started walking again.

"Is there something wrong? Something about the carriage?"

"No, it's nothing," said the double-chinned girl. She tried to shake it off, but the look of suspicion still clouded her usually cheerful face and would not go away.

After reaching the road connecting the Kanda and Kôjimachi wards, Daigo parted company with the others.

When he returned home, dinner was ready.

"You're late."

Sitting across from Daigo at the table, Sayo ate her dinner with chopsticks as she listened to her taciturn son describe the day's training at Renbei-jyuku.

"Did you meet a formidable opponent?" she asked.

"So—you know?" Daigo knew that his mother might cut a feminine and willowy figure, but she also possessed the keen eye of a martial artist.

"Your entire body is bursting with energy," she said, setting down her rice bowl. "That hasn't happened since you came to Tokyo. Who is this opponent?"

"Well, a nobleman from a foreign land. He called himself Count Dracula."

"A foreign land?"

Daigo caught the change in his mother's voice and face. Rarely since they had left their Aomori home—or even since he was a little child—had he seen his mother so shaken.

"Mother, what is it?"

"I've told you many times how we lost your father. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

When mother and son had left their snowy home for the capital, they still had a man they could call husband and father.

Minazuki Shôichirô had gotten a job as a patrolman with the Metropolitan Police Department. With the outbreak of the Seinan War, however, he had headed for Kagoshima as a member of the Battôtai brigade and had vanished.

"Your father was one of the bravest men, and he went to Tabaruzaka where the fighting was hardest. He was injured but only after he had cut down more than ten men on his own. He was on a boat with other injured men heading back to Tokyo, when the boat vanished. There were no reports that they had encountered rough seas. What exactly happened remains a mystery."

Daigo nodded. When he remembered the day he was told his father had vanished, it felt like a wooden sword being plunged into his body.

One day, he had asked his father why he had fought in the shogun's army in the Boshin War, when it had been clear that it was a losing battle.

And his father had answered proudly, "The enemy attacked us under the banner of the emperor. When that happened, many of the men from clans that were indebted to the Tokugawa turned their backs on the shogun and fought for the other side. We knew how it would all end. The times had changed in favor of the emperor's army. Even so, I was proud to be a part of the Ôu Allied Clans, which had fought loyally for the shogun until the very end. Whether that was a foolish choice or a wise one is a decision left to other men. I don't think we will ever know which was the right decision, but our clan chose the old-fashioned notion of loyalty, despite the changing times. For my own part, I believe I chose well."

This was the father who had vanished into the sea, bloody sword in hand. And Daigo understood now that when his mother had just heard about the man from the other side of the ocean, she had been overcome with a wave of emotion. Although she had said that his father had died honorably, she had probably held out hope that he was alive somewhere in a foreign land.

However, she picked up her rice bowl and went back to eating.

Embarrassed, she said, “Let’s forget about it, Daigo.”

“Yes.” It was all he could say.

3

September 22, 188–, 6:00 A.M.
Lower Niban-chô, Kôjimachi Ward, Tokyo

Daigo was in no mood to see her.

However, there she was, waiting by the entrance of his house.

“How long have you been here?” he asked.

Chizuru smiled sadly. “You finally noticed me.”

She shielded her eyes from Daigo, who stood there in silence.

“I’m sorry. Please don’t concern yourself. About me or about the dojo.”

Two days ago, Kashiwabara Isanosuke had asked

Daigo to marry Chizuru and succeed him as the head of Renbei-jyuku.

Chizuru raised her head and asked, "Were you absent from the dojo yesterday because you refused my father's request?"

He did not answer.

"If it is, please pay no mind. My father said so . . . as do I . . ." Chizuru hesitated, trying to hold back her feelings for Daigo.

"I don't think I will visit Renbei-jyuku again," said Daigo quietly with steely conviction.

"Then—you are bothered by—"

"What your father asks of me is too much. I am sorry, but I am not worthy of succeeding him as the head of Renbei-jyuku."

"Please don't say that you're sorry."

Her voice was heartrending, as vivid memories began to creep up from within. When she had met Daigo three years ago, they were both fourteen years old. That same day at the dojo, he had defeated all four of the *Shitennô* by ippon. In a revenge match a week later, they could not even touch him. Observing it all quietly from outside the dojo, Chizuru felt something more than the excitement of seeing a skilled fighter. For three years, she had lived trying to suppress those feelings every time she saw him and thought about him.

Neither Daigo nor his actions had ever conveyed any negative feeling toward her, until half a year ago.

And now, all he could say was that he was sorry. She wanted to ask if there was anything else he wanted to say to a seventeen-year-old girl.

"You began to change around springtime. Why do you turn away your eyes every time you see me? Why won't you ask me to walk with you anymore?"

"Please forgive me." Daigo bowed and turned to go. But he had no idea where he needed to go. He had planned only to spend the day at the park like yesterday, eat the bento his mother had prepared for him, and go home.

"Wait, please," she called out from behind him. "Someone from another style of fencing came to the dojo and asked for a match yesterday. The four *Shitennô* accepted the challenge, but they all lost in one blow."

"Oh?"

Renbei-jyuku did not prohibit matches with students from other styles of fencing. The dojo even allowed matches using wooden swords, rather than bamboo. In the past, more than a hundred fencers had brashly come to Renbei-jyuku asking for a match and gone away with broken arms and legs, mostly at the hands of the *Shitennô*. That someone had bested them was quite a feat.

Daigo's racing heart slowed to a quiet and steady beat. The seventeen-year-old possessed great poise, which was a result of years of training—and of something else.

"I will write a letter of apology to sensei today and deliver it later. Please just forget about me."

With this, he tried to excuse himself, but Chizuru shot back, "The man was—looking for you."

Daigo turned around. "Me?"

Chizuru nodded. "He asked for you by name. Then he refused to take off his cloak inside the dojo. That made Otsuka-san so angry, he wanted to break his arm."

Then the *Shitennô* had all been defeated.

Daigo remembered that his mother had told him about seeing a man just outside their house. "He had a pale face and wore a cloak— No, he was Japanese. Oasa-san and Omichi-san were there with me by the well, but I was the only one who seemed to notice him looking at us. When I stared back at him suspiciously, he left right away. Daigo, you and your father are both men of the sword. You don't know how many enemies you have. Please, be very careful."

Could he have been the one to beat the *Shitennô*? Daigo searched his memories, but he could not recall anyone who fit that description.

"He said he would come again this afternoon. My father will probably fight him if you don't come."

"What?"

Everyone respected Isanosuke's skill. However, it would have taken the Isanosuke of ten years ago to hold his own against the man who had defeated the *Shitennô,* and the Isanosuke of twenty years ago to have a chance of defeating him.

"How does he fight?"

"It was scary. He just stood at *seigan.* They attacked him first but couldn't land a single hit. Then he beat them all with a single strike."

Daigo looked at Chizuru. "If he asks for me, you can avoid a confrontation by telling him I'm not there. Your father must not fight him."

"My father would rather die than turn his back on an opponent."

A shadow stole over her face.

"But he never told me to find you. Coming here was my decision."

"I know."

Daigo knew that this was exactly how Isanosuke would handle the situation.

Who was this man who was so formidable with the sword? What kind of skill did he have? Daigo tried to fight back his rising curiosity.

"Still, we should avoid a confrontation altogether. And so, if you will excuse me," he said abruptly.

For several moments, Chizuru watched him walk away. People passing by stared at the forlorn figure, standing alone in the cool morning air.

After returning home, Chizuru went to Akane's room.

Akane was still in bed, a rare thing for a girl who could usually be seen taking a cold shower in the dead of winter as part of her training or swinging a wooden sword or sweating as she practiced her defensive falls. She had been acting strangely since that night at the count's mansion. She wore a bandage on her neck, insisting it was a bug bite, but did not put any medicine on it. Chizuru wondered if she had been poisoned.

It was also troubling to see Akane look so unnaturally thin in just a day.

As Chizuru went to close the window, Akane called out, "Sister?"

"Hm?"

"Did you go to Daigo-san's house?"

Chizuru hadn't told anyone. She was more scared than shocked by the question. "You shouldn't sleep with the window open. It's not that warm anymore."

"You did go, didn't you?"

"Akane-san." When Chizuru turned around, she looked into Akane's eyes. It must have been an illusion that, for a split second, they looked as if they were burning.

But then, Akane was back to her usual self and smiled. "I heard from Father . . . that Daigo-san refused. But you have to press him harder, dear sister. Don't be shy. You have to keep at him."

"Akane-san . . ."

Akane turned her pale face away. "Go away. I'm tired. I'm going to Kôdôkan after a nap."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Besides, there's someone wonderful waiting for me."

"Saigô-san?" Chizuru felt her heart grow heavy. Had Akane found someone new?

"That's right—the judo prodigy. Do you know *yama arashi*?"

"Why, no."

"It's a throw move that only he can perform. He can send a sumo wrestler flying in the air. There's no one in the dojo who can beat that move."

"My!"

"You and he are a good match, sister."

"What?" Chizuru didn't know how to respond.

Looking sideways, Akane said again, "You and Daigo-san. You really are a good match. Don't give up."

The heaviness in her heart was now accompanied by darkness.

Akane called him "Daigo." Since Akane was thirteen, she had clung to Daigo and begged him to teach her kendo.

Chizuru knew that Akane had nothing more to say.

The situation with Daigo, the approaching match between her father and enemy, and now her sister's broken heart. In spite of it all, Chizuru stood straighter and left the room. In the distance, she could hear the sound of a carriage. The world would go on. She had no time to stop and feel sad.

Her father was in the dojo. A woeful feeling came over her. He might be able to hold his own against the *Shitennô.* But against that man from yesterday . . .

She hadn't told him about seeing Daigo. He might have already sensed it through the heightened instincts of a martial artist, but, even if he had, he was not the type to let on.

Chizuru felt heavy with inexpressible worry, but then something else happened to darken her mood further.

"Hello."

A student, who had gone out to see who was at the gate, came stumbling back with a bewildered look.

"This is big news! The Kôdôkan head Kanô Jigorô and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lord Inoue Kaoru are at the gate and wish to sit in on our training session!"

Amid the restless voices of the students, Isanosuke said calmly, "That's enough. I have met the minister several times. Kanô-kun must have told him something to strike the minister's fancy and brought him here. Conduct your training as you normally would. Compose yourselves."

With that, he went out to receive them at the entrance.

Minister Inoue wore a frock coat. He was from the Chôshu clan. After he had joined the movement to overthrow the shogunate, he became a central figure in the new government and took several posts. Presently, as the minister of foreign affairs, he was working on amending the one-sided treaties that had been signed with America and Europe. He was an enthusiast of all disciplines of the martial arts; and, in fact, everyone knew that he had been instrumental in reviving interest in them after the fall of the shogunate.

Isanosuke greeted them politely and tried to show them into the private room. But the minister dismissed such proprieties with a simple wave of his hand.

"Don't mind us. We worried about intruding, but Kanô and I just finished a meeting planning a martial arts competition. On the way back, Kanô-kun here suddenly remembered this dojo, and we couldn't resist. Really, don't trouble yourself over us. It is well known that Kamiizumi Isenokami's old-style *Shinkage-ryû* is still practiced here. We simply wish to observe the training of the magnificent Renbei-jyuku, and then we will be on our way."

Jigorô, who stood beside him, added, "As his lordship said, we should have called on you in a proper manner. Please forgive us for intruding."

He bowed deeply, which made Isanosuke shrink back.

Jigorô had made his own improvements on the ancient art of jujitsu, giving birth to judo, a new martial art that was dedicated to spiritual enrichment. Everyone knew and respected his achievements. His political power, too, was evident in the way he now talked face-to-face with Minister Inoue. His humble demeanor, in spite of all that, was more than enough to earn Isanosuke's admiration.

"As you wish. You're welcome to observe from over there. Oh, and this scholar—?"

"This is my apprentice, Saigô Shirô," Jigorô said a bit proudly, and he was instantly rewarded by Isanosuke's pleasant reaction.

"Oh, so this is him!" Even three-year-olds knew the name of the judo prodigy who, in the police department's martial arts competition, brought victory to Kôdôkan with his throw move called *yama arashi*. In the minds of the children, the name synonymous with Kôdôkan and judo was not Kanô Jigorô but rather Saigô Shirô.

"I'd like to watch from somewhere I am not in the way."

Shirô flashed a carefree smile as they were led into the dojo. After being welcomed by the students, the three visitors took their seats.

Under ordinary circumstances, this would have been an enormous honor for the students of Renbeijyuku. However, this visit could not have come at a worse time.

The enemy would soon arrive.

And, if by chance, Isanosuke were defeated, his and the Renbei-jyuku name would be dragged in the mud.

The injured *Shitennô* were no match for this enemy.

Only Chizuru knew her father's anguish.

Just as Isanosuke was about to call on his students to resume training, there was a sound of another visitor at the entrance.

One student ordered, "Let him in." The same student returned to the dojo with a man shrouded in a cloak that looked like an enormous raven perched on his shoulders.

While the students, who had witnessed the scene yesterday, shot fearful and murderous looks at the arrival of a second enemy, Minister Inoue seemed to sense something and looked on in fascination. Kanô Jigorô's eyes gleamed, and Saigô Shirô trembled with excitement.

Those with martial arts training had sensed the arrival of a very suspicious man.

Chapter Three

THE STRANGE VISITOR

1

"I apologize for dropping in without notice," said the figure in black. "I enjoy walking in the light of day sometimes, even if the day is overcast. And this is my first time meeting true Japanese swordsmen. I am Count Dracula."

He regarded the men with a hawklike air, and someone in the crowd gasped in awe.

The count heard the man; he tilted his face in the direction of the sound and curled his lip. It was a smile. He had recognized Shirô in the crowd.

"This is rude indeed," said Isanosuke stiffly. "At the moment, we have guests at this dojo—government dignitaries. You must go."

Count Dracula grinned. It was a wicked, blood-chilling smile, entirely different from the one he had given Shirô.

"Of course. But first I must apologize. The one who injured your followers yesterday was my servant. I had given him a sword, and I suppose he wanted to test his skill. Although I was not aware of his actions, I've come to ask for your forgiveness. It's not much, but I hope this will be of some help with the hospital fees."

The count produced a leather satchel from inside his cloak. It looked heavy.

Without looking, he tossed it aside. The student, who quickly reached out to catch it, nearly buckled under the weight of the satchel.

"Now I am done with apologies. I have a request to make. I would like to challenge the best fencer in this dojo to a match."

The crowd, at first dumbfounded by the count's arrogance, now buzzed with activity.

It had been bad enough that his "servant," as this man had said in such archaic fashion, had come to the dojo and injured several of its students. But now the servant's master had the audacity to return to the dojo and demand a match with a master fencer. And there was nothing apologetic about the arrogant way in which he spoke and threw down the satchel.

"As I said, we have important guests. And we do not accept challenges from foreign fencers. Please leave at once." Isanosuke made his refusal clear.

The count smiled again. This time, it was more of a mocking sneer.

"Far away, on the other side of the ocean, in my country, I had heard that Japan was a land of warriors. And once I met a warrior who seemed proof of this rumor. But perhaps I was mistaken. A day will come when you have no choice but to fight a foreign enemy. However, I suppose you will merely make excuses, as you are doing now, and lock your gates. If the warrior I met long ago heard of this, he would commit hara-kiri out of shame. Fortunately, he is no longer here. Pardon me."

"Wait!" someone called out. The count stopped.

"I am Kanô Jigorô. I am a teacher and student of a different discipline of martial arts."

"Ah," said the count, turning around. "Jigorô Kanô—a name I have heard many times since I arrived in the capital. It is an honor to meet you. Could this tiny warrior be one of your followers?"

The founder of judo turned to Shirô with a look of surprise. "Do you know him? He is not my follower but my apprentice. He lives in my dojo, training and studying judo night and day."

"Ah, it seems your dojo has at least one decent apprentice—unlike this dojo, whose students would rather avert their eyes than match swords with an enemy."

Isanosuke and the students, who had been under the spell of the count's imposing manner, became angry again.

"Sensei, Renbei-jyuku does not run or hide. Let me fight this ill-mannered foreigner!"

"No, let me!"

"And me!"

Angry shouts came one after the next out of the crowd. Isanosuke raised his arm to calm his students.

"It appears my students have taught me. Renbei-jyuku does not turn its back on an enemy. I hesitated because Lord Inoue and Sensei Kanô are present, but perhaps they would like to observe how we match up against someone from another style of fencing. Is this all right?"

"Of course." Lord Inoue nodded without hiding his excitement. He was the one who had persuaded Jigorô to drop in unannounced. His daring was, at the very least, equal to that of the count.

"All of us martial artists will support your decision, Kashiwabara-san," said Jigorô. "But first, I have two or three things to ask. All right?" He looked at

Isanosuke and the count, who both nodded. "Count Dracula, are you from Eastern Europe?"

"You are correct. My home is at the end of the world, Transylvania."

Jigorô's eyes glimmered. "I studied medicine long ago. Not formally . . . dabbled in it, really, hoping it would be of some use in judo. I have a friend who researches the relationship between superstition and endemic diseases. I first heard about Transylvania from him."

"Oh, so what disease is endemic in my country? And what is its relationship to superstition?"

"Perhaps that is for another discussion," Jigorô continued, "but I became interested in what my friend had told me and began to study your country's history and traditions. It was difficult because there was very little information, but I managed it with the help of a book importer."

"I agree that it is those who improve their knowledge through study who will succeed in this new age," said the count. "However, false knowledge can often be dangerous to its bearer, as well as needless knowledge." The count glared directly at Jigorô. It was a look that had the power to intimidate even the judo genius. The count turned to Isanosuke and said, "It seems Jigorô Kanô is done. I'm ready for my match."

"Very well. Your weapon?"

"Here." It was only then that everyone realized that the count had been concealing his right hand inside his cape all this time.

That hand emerged from the cape. It gripped a long sword. There was a hemispherical cover between the blade and the hilt. And that was all Shirô could make out before the sword began to dance.

There was not a bow or *kiai*—no sound at all. It was a total surprise attack, and yet Isanosuke, who had been standing in the way of the sword's trajectory, had moved to the right in a blink of an eye. To everyone's amazement, he was now in a fighting stance.

"You coward!" one student shouted, standing up. Isanosuke had barely dodged a sneak attack. The students were in an uproar as others rose to their feet.

"That's enough!" Isanosuke barked. "It is the martial artist's duty to be prepared for any attack. There's no use yelling 'coward' once you're dead."

"Indeed." The count smiled. "For what you have just said—and for your skill in evading my attack—I take back everything I said about your dojo earlier."

"What a relief," replied Isanosuke, sliding forward toward the count.

His wooden sword shot out. It appeared that only his hands were brought forward, but the count let out a cry and leaped back. The sword came at his chest in a fierce thrust. The count landed on one knee ten feet away, but Isanosuke's sword menaced him with all the skill its wielder had inherited from the master Kamiizumi Isenokami.

The count's right arm and sword rose.

Everyone saw his eyes burning crimson.

Isanosuke stood motionless, and several seconds passed.

There was a silent, murderous exchange between the two men, which was not obvious. Only Jigorô had caught it—and Shirô.

Isanosuke lurched forward.

The sword fell from his hand. As it hit the ground, the sound echoed. Then Isanosuke clutched his chest with his left hand and fell to the ground.

"Sensei!"

The students ran to him. Shirô and Jigorô, who had studied some medicine, followed.

Then Chizuru ran in and knelt beside her father.

She looked desperately at Jigorô, who was taking her father's pulse, her hand resting on his forehead.

"It's his heart. Get a doctor quickly."

"Yes," answered Chizuru. When she got up, a chill ran down her spine.

Automatically, she looked in the direction of the man who made her blood run so cold.

The count was on his feet. With those burning eyes, he stared at Chizuru—

At her pale beauty. At her slender neck.

Shutting her eyes, she ran away toward the main house.

Watching her leave the dojo, Count Dracula put away his sword.

"He defeated Kashiwabara Isanosuke with only his spirit. I can't believe it," muttered Lord Inoue.

"Indeed," agreed Kanô Jigorô. "However . . ."

"However?" Inoue's question went unheard, for the students were rising in anger at the count's imminent departure.

"Wait!"

Dracula stopped in his tracks. Seizing the opportunity, the students grabbed their wooden swords and surrounded him. Then they realized that the count had not stopped because of them.

Standing between the count and the door was Minazuki Daigo.

2

"Well, well. A second warrior."

The count could hardly contain his joy or, rather, his amusement.

"Ah, now I remember you had said you were a follower of this dojo."

"An apprentice. I was watching your match with the sensei from the window. But first, I apologize again for intruding the other night." Daigo bowed.

"Don't mention it. But why were you watching from the window?"

Daigo fell silent. He had planned never to set foot inside Renbei-jyuku again. But he had broken his vow because he could not resist the desire to get a glimpse of the mysterious man who had so easily beaten the *Shitennô.*

Unwilling to enter the dojo, he had watched from the window. He was surprised to see the foreigner in black whom he had encountered at the mansion, but he was even more shocked to discover that this man's servant had been to one to defeat the *Shitennô.* If that wasn't startling enough, he had just witnessed the count defeat his sensei Isanosuke. After seeing his sensei fall, Daigo felt his soul burning—the soul of one who lived by the sword. The reason he had entered the dojo and stood before this man in black was not to redeem his sensei's honor or to defend the honor of the old-style *Shinkage-ryû* but simply out of a warrior's desire to fight when faced with a formidable foe.

"I have a request," said Daigo in voice so fierce it made the students clamoring around Isanosuke fall silent.

"I'm listening."

"I would like to challenge you to a match."

Again, the students stirred. He was still young, but the *Shitennô* were no match for this kendo prodigy. Perhaps he could . . . The students buzzed with anticipation.

"I don't mind. But is it to avenge your master's defeat?"

"No."

"To defend the honor of your school?"

"No."

"Then why do you challenge me?"

"Because it is the way of the sword."

The count stared at Daigo in an oddly peaceful way. Twisting his body to the right, he looked out the window.

"The rain makes everything hazy," said the man from the foreign land. "Everything. The past, present, and the future. At least, in my country.

"But your country is different. Soon it will stop raining, and the vibrant sun will shine down on the future. Whatever that future may be."

Everyone was silent.

The count continued quietly, "Where I come from was a small country surrounded by enemy nations. My countrymen took up swords to beat back the invading armies. As did I. Even now, the sultans in Turkey would turn white at the mere sound of the name *Dracula*."

Daigo well believed this man was capable of inspiring such fear.

"The pounding hooves of tens of thousands of horses, the sound of arrows raining down, the clanging of swords, so much bloodshed . . . Have you ever seen the dark earth turned red with blood? The enemy plunged their swords into my countrymen and burned them alive without mercy. And I repaid them for what they had done. I killed every man who turned his blade against me. Then, as a sign and seal of my victory, I impaled them on stakes so high that they could reach the heavens."

The men saw the count's lips turn upward into a smile. From behind the unusually red lips appeared white fanglike teeth.

They quickly disappeared, and the count continued, "However, the times are changing. They have taken everything away. My country is weary of battle but has nothing ahead of it. And as a man who risked his life in war, I know this to be true. . . . There is no future in the way of the sword."

"What do you mean by that?" Daigo realized the stiff voice was his own.

The count replied, "The sword will not perish. However, it will survive as something different from what you are striving for. A world without war has no use for the sword. Soon, the art of the sword will decline until it is merely a method for exercising the body. The world does not desire war and death. Neither do the men who rule it."

When the count finished, the sound of rain could be heard.

Although, given the present company, the count's statement had been highly improper, no one raised a voice to dispute him.

Everyone—the count, Daigo, the students, as well as Saigô Shirô, his master, and the politician—silently listened to the rain come down.

Then the count spoke. "However, it appears that the true way of the sword survives within you. I will gladly honor your request."

"I am grateful." Daigo bowed his head slightly, without taking his eyes off the count. The match had already begun, and he could not complain if the count attacked him while he was at his most vulnerable.

The count did nothing, but only followed Daigo to the center of the dojo.

It would not have been so extraordinary years ago, but for the men who had lost the instinct, it was a most unusual sight to witness two men who were ready to fight to the death.

The palpable tension between them had shocked everyone into stillness.

Only Shirô reacted. "I must stop them," he said to Jigorô. However, Jigorô put out a hand and stopped him. "Sensei!?"

"Watch."

"But they're serious. One of them will die. Both of them could die!"

"Only one will die." He might have been right. But Shirô could not help but feel there was something eerie about Jigorô's confidence.

"What?" When Shirô looked at his master, he suddenly felt something, a powerful, murderous wave of some kind, hitting the side of his face.

The count had unleashed a massive thrust, which Daigo had evaded. But Daigo could not counterattack. Against the count's swift thrusts, it was all Daigo could do to sidestep the attack and press himself against the wall.

"Sensei." Shirô tried to run out and intervene.

At that moment, one student had helped Isanosuke sit up where he had fallen. Shirô did not hear the words Isanosuke had muttered so quietly. "Fool. No thrust can touch Daigo."

The count pulled back his sword.

A final strike. It was unmistakable.

No one could tell which had been faster—the thrust or Daigo.

The black blade appeared to pierce Daigo's chest. And Daigo's sword blazed white as it struck the count's heart.

Letting out a sharp cry, the black figure flew backward and crashed against the wall. The dojo shook.

Daigo also fell forward on the floor. He coughed, clutching his chest. The floor below him turned red. With blood.

"Daigo-sama!" A sorrowful cry pierced the air. "Daigo-sama!" Chizuru cried out again and ran to his side. When she had returned from sending a maid out for a doctor, the match had already begun.

As he looked at the excited students, it was Kanô Jigorô who announced, "It's a draw!"

Though no one could argue it was not an impartial judgment, it did not make the decision any less regrettable.

Someone yelled out, "No, victory belongs to Minazuki Daigo!"

All eyes turned to the count.

Peeling himself off the wall, he said, "He struck me in the chest and evaded my sword brilliantly. I haven't felt such pain in four hundred— Well, in a long time.

"However," he said, looking at Daigo, who was still coughing up blood, "It appears you and I are destined for the same place. I may, therefore, be of some service to you."

Nobody understood these words.

The count moved toward the door uneasily.

After he had disappeared from sight, the students heard him say faintly, "We will meet again."

Daigo was still coughing, and everyone knew what had caused Daigo's coughing fit.

A few moved away from the horrible sight.

Daigo continued to cough, staining Chizuru's knees with blood. The poor seventeen-year-old suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis.

"Quickly, both of you come inside." Chizuru turned to the door and gasped. Someone new was at the door. It was Akane in her nightgown. One of the students groaned at the sight of her pale, waxy complexion. "Akane. Go back inside."

Akane did not seem to hear her sister.

"The man . . . he's gone," she said in a deathly voice.

"Who do you mean?"

All eyes were focused on the sisters.

Akane smiled knowingly. The teeth that protruded from her mouth were sharp like an animal's.

"I will . . . see him again . . . sister."

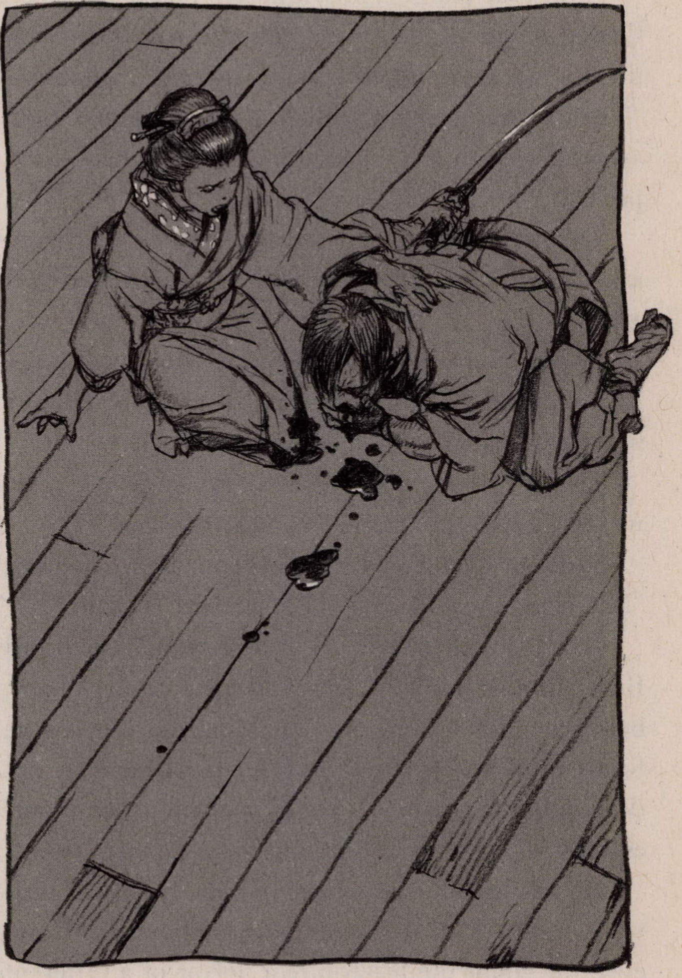
She fell over unconscious. Kanô Jigorô came to her side.

The incident ended with the arrival of two doctors; and finally, Kanô Jigorô, along with Lord Inoue and Saigô Shirô, decided it was time to leave. Once the three were in the carriage, the words came pouring out of the minister's mouth.

"Well, I never knew there existed foreigners so skilled with the sword. We should invite someone like him to our next party. Don't you think, Kanô-kun?" he asked, hardly able to contain his excitement.

"As you wish," answered Jigorô indifferently. "Shirô, where did you meet that man?"

"At the count's home. The mansion in Kôjimachi. The one that belonged to the trading company."



"Oh, that place?" The minister raised his voice. Owing to his position, he knew the names and addresses of most international trading companies. "Then I simply must send him an invitation right away. If we can learn something about Transylvania, perhaps we can open a new market."

Ignoring the rather overexcited minister, Jigorô asked Shirô for the details of the events of two nights ago.

"A man who prefers an overcast day . . . who destroyed Millet's cheerful painting . . . and who has bats flying inside his mansion . . ."

Jigorô's nervous expression made Shirô grow weary. He asked, "Sensei, do you know him?"

Without changing his expression, Jigorô replied, "Minazuki-kun's illness . . . I hope there is a cure."

"He is an extraordinary young man," said Lord Inoue, leaning in. "The count said some strange things, but I believe that young men like Minazuki-kun are the future leaders of our country. The martial arts are not dead in Japan, nor should we allow them to die. If necessary, I will procure the best doctor in Japan for him."

"Please make arrangements for Sensei Kashiwabara and Minazuki-kun." Jigorô bowed. "However, the count might require a doctor of a different sort." His eyes gleamed.

Shirô shuddered. Based on the company he kept, perhaps it was more accurate to call Jigorô a politician than a warrior, but every once in a while, he had an expression on his face that reminded Shirô what a demon he had been in the dojo and in the martial arts. Now was one of those times.

"Why has he come such a long distance to our country? That is what I want to know. And I saw him staring at the girl's throat wound."

The judo founder's voice echoed not only inside the carriage but inside Shirô's and Inoue's minds as well.

3

After the doctors, who had arrived with all speed by jinrikisha, had examined him, Daigo was instructed to pick up his medicine the next day and was then allowed to go home. Isanosuke, on the other hand, had been admitted to the hospital.

Although several students offered to see him home, Daigo refused and walked home alone.

With one look, his mother knew everything.

As he lay on his side on the futon, Daigo described the incident at the dojo.

His mother usually asked to hear how his training went and the results of his matches, but today she fussed over him to keep herself from crying.

"Please don't be sad, Mother. I am satisfied," he said, trying to cheer her up.

She shot back, "What is so satisfying about coughing up blood? You have your whole life ahead of you."

Daigo smiled and articulated the thought he had long held in silence. "I never expected to live to be my father's age. Soon, I will have to say good-bye to you, too, Mother. I consider myself lucky to have met someone like Count Dracula."

"Don't say such things. You must forget about fighting until you are better."

"My time is too short for me to forget anything."

"Say that again and I will never forgive you, Daigo. I will kill you and then cut my own throat. Do you understand?"

Daigo nodded. "I'm sorry, Mother."

"Good." His mother broke down, wiping the tears away on her sleeve. "You have your father's blood in your veins, so I know it will be impossible for you to forget about fighting. But tonight you must forget everything and get some rest. I am going to get your medicine. It can't wait until tomorrow."

Soon after his mother left, Daigo fell into a feverish sleep.

He dreamed of his father. He wore a haori, a hakama, and two swords. Although his face was a blur, Daigo knew in his heart that this was his father.

Father. Daigo called out to the man before him.

Suddenly, the face became clearer.

The face he recognized was Count Dracula's.

Daigo tried to jump, but his feet did not move.

"Daigo," said the count.

Daigo—

When he woke up, he realized that the voice was real.

"Daigo-san."

He must have been asleep for some time. The room was lit by the bluish tint of night.

He went from the bedroom out into the entryway.

"Shirô-kun, is something wrong?"

"I'm sorry. There was no answer, so I let myself in," said Shirô with a look of relief. He had come to check on Daigo. "Um, how are you feeling?"

"Good. I'm fine now. My mother is out getting medicine. Please come in."

"Oh, no—" The young man with the sunny disposition hesitated uncharacteristically.

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Uh, yes," he said, nodding. But he broke down under the force of Daigo's piercing look. "Actually, I'm on my way to Renbei-jyuku. Sensei insisted I get back there before the sun went down."

"Sensei Kanô?"

"Yes."

Once he had heard the whole story, Daigo was shocked. Jigorô had sent his most important apprentice to go not to Renbei-jyuku but to stand guard outside Akane's room. He had ordered him to keep an eye out for anything suspicious from nightfall to sunrise.

"From nightfall to sunrise. It sounds like you're on the lookout for burglars."

"I know. On top of that, he gave me this when we were riding back from Renbei-jyuku."

Shirô reached into his sleeve and unwrapped a small bundle.

It was a small gold crucifix. On the cross was the figure of Jesus Christ. Shirô had learned that this was called a crucifix, and that the same shape, but without the figure of Christ, was called a cross.

"He gave you this? I can't believe that looking at a statue of a Western god would make any burglar reconsider his actions."

Daigo stared at the crucifix suspiciously. It was well known that Jigorô was Christian, but he couldn't understand why he would impose his religion on Shirô.

"Neither can I. But he told me to keep it with me at all times." With a dissatisfied look, Shirô put the crucifix, which hung from a chain, around his neck.

"But why Akane-san's room?"

"I don't know." Shirô shook his head. "But I'm glad to see you are doing well. I'll come again tomorrow."

"Please don't trouble yourself. Thanks for coming."

"Not at all. You must get better soon. We made a promise."

"That's right."

Daigo smiled. They had promised to fight each other someday—Daigo's sword against Shirô's judo—in a serious match.

"I should be going."

Daigo went back to his futon after Shirô left.

I won't be able to keep my promise. He felt it deep within his heart.

It was difficult to know how long you might live but easy to recognize when death was near.

But had it been a good life?

Seventeen years. He had tried to live those years to their fullest, but he could not help but feel that his life had been too short.

His skill with the sword, which had long been recognized as that of a prodigy, was still improving. But the changing times left few opportunities for him to test his skill. The true way of the sword would soon be obsolete.

If that was the case, perhaps it was his destiny to disappear quietly along with it.

By the time darkness fell, his mother had returned.

Daigo took his medicine and ate his dinner by the dim light of a paper lantern.

Even though he was feverish and did not have an appetite, he managed to finish his meal. There was no telling when he would have to fight, so he made an effort to keep his strength up at all times.

"Try to get some rest. I'm going to finish my work."

Since Daigo did not make enough money teaching at the dojo, Sayo took on some sewing work from the neighborhood to bring in a little more.

After Daigo was asleep, she took out her sewing box. Someone banged at the door.

Was it Shirô?

An uneasy feeling brought Daigo off the futon. Stopping his mother from getting up, he grabbed a wooden sword that was propped against the wall and went to the entrance area.

"Who is it?" he asked.

The reply came quickly. "Pardon me for this late night visit. I am Count Dracula."

This surprised Daigo. Why was he here at this hour? Maybe to finish the match? Before he could organize his thoughts, in the other room his mother asked, "Daigo, is this the man who—"

"What do you want?" Daigo asked, cutting his mother off.

"I wish to speak to you . . . about a Japanese samurai I met four hundred years ago."

"Four hundred years ago?"

"His name was Minazuki Shôichirô. He had a fighting style just like yours."

Daigo heard Sayo behind him catch her breath. Daigo himself was stunned for a moment.

That was his father's name.

"Please let him in."

It didn't matter whether or not he had heard his mother, because he had removed the wooden slat and opened the door almost immediately.

The darkness filled the doorway, punctuated by two crimson-colored stars shining high above. Then it spoke. " May I come in? I cannot enter without an answer."

"Excuse me. Please come in." As soon as Daigo answered, the darkness flooded in and took the form of the man.

"During the day, I am usually asleep or writing at home. I am only able to go out at night." He smiled, revealing jagged teeth. "Today was an exception."

Daigo almost smiled along with him. He was certainly a grim and mysterious man, but martial arts gave them a common bond. They both possessed the spirit to seek battle and the desire to risk their lives in combat.

"You are the man who made my son cough up blood."

Sayo was standing at the entrance of the tatami room.

The count bowed and said, "You have a fine son."

"Even I, his mother, would acknowledge that he is a master swordsman. You must also be a warrior of some renown in your own country to have defeated him. I welcome you to our humble home. It is hardly the place to receive such an esteemed guest from a foreign land, but please come inside."

"I will."

The count boldly stepped into the tatami room, without so much as acknowledging Daigo. That he knew to take off his shoes only days after coming to Japan was commendable.

He was enormous.

It was not all that uncommon for foreigners over six shaku tall to visit Renbei-jyuku, but this man appeared to be close to seven shaku tall. And with his broad chest and shoulders, there was practically no room for Daigo in the small six-tatami mat room.

Somehow they managed to negotiate the space so that mother and son sat facing the count.

"First, let me tell you about Minazuki Shôichirô. My purpose in coming to this country is so that I may pass on his personal items to his family."

From his cape, the count took out a dagger with a vermilion sheath and a bundle of hair tied together with string. He laid the items before them.

"May I?"

"Please."

Sayo took the dagger in her hand, stared at it for several seconds, and drew the blade halfway. After staring at it for several more seconds, she passed it to Daigo.

Daigo saw the half-moon crest at the bottom of the blade and returned the dagger to its sheath.

"This belonged to my father. But how did it come into your hands?"

"I don't exactly know myself." The count's eyes narrowed. "But there is another mystery. Probably a mystery not even someone with eternal life could solve."

For the first time, Daigo noticed that the count's voice and expression suggested a fierce intellect.

"Since I first met your son at my mansion, I thought maybe I had found the person I was looking for. And our match today confirmed it. Perhaps it was the spirit of your father who brought you to me. I was able to come here because I had my servant follow you home. I apologize for my methods."

"Please don't. But just how and when did my husband meet you, and where did he die?"

He closed his eyes against the pressure of Sayo's gaze. Then, he said, "He died in a place called Transylvania. Do you not think that the dagger and hair look very old?"

"Why, yes." Both Sayo and Daigo nodded.

The color of the sheath was faded, and there was rust on the blade. The pin holding the blade in place inside the hilt appeared corroded as well. When the pin was removed, the blade shifted out of place.

Likewise, the bundle of hair was so brittle that the strands fell away when they were touched, as if the bundle were hundreds of years old.

"When I met Minazuki Shôichirô, he was a soldier in the Turkish army that invaded Wallachia. That was four hundred years ago."

Chapter Four

A SAMURAI IN WALLACHIA

1

Daigo couldn't believe it. Perhaps this man had even lied about being a count.

But when he looked again at the manner in which he sat—with his legs folded, precisely in the fashion of a Japanese native—Daigo reconsidered; he could not possibly be that kind of man. Sayo, on the other hand, could not stop blinking.

Finally Daigo said, "I know of this country called Turkey, but I hadn't heard that it was presently at war."

"Not at present. Four hundred years ago," the count corrected emphatically.

"But . . . setting aside the matter of my father, do you mean to tell me that you were alive four hundred years ago?"

The question was an obvious one. That his father had crossed the ocean and had found himself not only in a foreign country but also four hundred years in the past sounded like the tallest of tall tales. And then the man in front of him claimed to have fought against his father all those years ago. Daigo would have guessed the count to be in his mid-forties and certainly no older than fifty.

"I have been alive for over four hundred years," the count said suddenly.

Daigo felt something like a tremor deep inside his body that made him think that perhaps the count was telling the truth.

"But I know you will not believe me. So let us just say that it was my ancestor. Yes, what I am about to tell you is a story that my ancestors passed on in my family—but I swear to you, on my honor, that it is a true story."

Whether he swore on his honor or not, Daigo wasn't sure how much he would be able to believe, but he thought the story was at least worth hearing. His mother was already sitting up straight with both hands in her lap.

Sayo said, "Please go on."

Perhaps it was something about the way she spoke, or even the way she was sitting, but the count smiled at her. It was a very human smile, quite unlike his former expression.

"It was four hundred years ago. Back then, my country was fighting a war against the Turkish Empire."

For the next few hours, Daigo and Sayo listened and were drawn into the count's story, even though they could not believe it was true.

Four hundred years ago, when Wallachia had been embroiled in a long war against Turkey, Hungary, and Austria, a rumor about a brave warrior had spread throughout the Wallachian army.

According to this rumor, the warrior had appeared suddenly several months before in Turkish territory and had displayed such awesome skill with the sword that he was made a soldier in the Turkish army.

Although he was not a large man, he had shown unbelievable skill, cutting down several brave men with his sword.

The count's ancestor of seven generations ago—who also had the name Dracula—burned with a desire to fight this man. Dracula had been the commanding officer of the most feared fighting unit in the Wallachian army: the Order of the Dragon.

Then, in 146—, the two armies clashed just outside the Wallachian capital of Tîrgovişte. It was an invasion by the Turkish army, which was commanded by Mehmed II.

"My ancestor impaled captured invaders on poles. Some were pierced from their throat to the buttocks and others from the buttocks to the throat, and their bodies were exhibited along both sides of the streets. In his greatness, my ancestor had calculated the length and thickness of the poles and how deep to drive them in order to further prolong his victims' suffering. A victory celebration was even held beneath the stakes. If anyone complained about the foul odor of the corpses, he was told to go where the air was better and then impaled on a pole higher than all the rest.

"And the battle with the foreign warrior also took place beneath these rows of corpses."

The count was quiet for a moment. His eyes had a faraway look. Daigo thought the unthinkable: perhaps it really had been the count himself who had stood on that battlefield four hundred years ago.

"And then?" Sayo urged the count to continue.

"According to journal accounts and letters written by my ancestor, this warrior was small and in his thirties; and, unlike the Turkish soldiers, he wielded a fine, curved sword, which he plunged into the bodies of well-armed men. His hair was tied back in a peculiar fashion, and he had a large mole on the right side of his nose."

Sayo moaned. "That was him. I am sure."

"My ancestor and the little warrior matched swords on three different occasions. The first time, Dracula was so astonished by the keenness and quickness of the other's sword that he asked his name. The man's reply: Minazuki Shôichirô—a Japanese samurai. From that moment on, the name echoed in Dracula's mind every time he saw the gleam of a sword."

Daigo was gripped by a strange thought. Could it really have been the count—not a long-ago ancestor—who had regarded his father with a comrade's respect?

"And then?" Daigo asked. Now he was more interested in how the three contests had ended, rather than in the mystery of how his father could have possibly been alive four hundred years ago.

The count smiled again, though this time it was a grimace.

"Evidently, my ancestor was defeated on all three occasions," said the count. "The first time, his right shoulder was wounded. The second time, which came half a day later, his left arm was cut off at the shoulder. The third time came after he had put himself through some hard training, and he was stabbed in the chest.

He might have died the first two times had his men not interceded."

"The first two? But what happened the third time?"

"After he—that is, Minazuki Shôichirô—had stabbed him in the chest, he carried Dracula to a safe place. Then he said, in broken Turkish, 'Live long, brave warrior,' and returned to the battlefield. It was then my ancestor realized that your father had deliberately spared his life.

"After his wounds had healed, my ancestor sought out Minazuki for a fourth time—this time, to pay his respects. However, his unit had pulled out of Wallachia, and it was not until later that he had gotten word that a swordsman from a foreign land had been captured in Braşov. My ancestor rode his horse for three days and three nights to get to Braşov, but the warrior had not been captured. The Wallachian army had shot a torrent of arrows at him because there was no one left who would dare match swords with him. My ancestor became so enraged that he impaled every archer and commander responsible. When he saw Minazuki again, he was still alive. It was then the warrior confessed to being from the future."

Daigo leaned forward, while his mother stiffened.

At last, they had come to the heart of this strange mystery.

How had his father, who had vanished at sea, been a part of a story that had taken place in a foreign land four hundred years ago?

"I spoke to your father about it."

Although a dozen arrows had pierced his body, Shôichirô's voice maintained a steady calm and did not reveal his excruciating pain.

"According to your father, he had been trying to return to his family when he was caught in a strange storm. The sea had swelled with so many waves, it was like a mountain range, driving the wounded men aboard the ship so wild with fear that they threw themselves overboard, even while their comrades were swallowed up by the sea. Lightning tore through the sky; black clouds rumbled. Then your father had been assaulted by a strange sensation—the sensation of being sucked in."

"Sucked in?"

The count nodded. Daigo considered the irony: that a man who was so great a mystery himself could not solve this one.

"You father actually described this sensation in another way. It might be the key to the puzzle."

"How did he describe it?"

"He said he had felt as if his brain, blood, stomach, heart . . . as if his whole body had aged rapidly."

Had his father felt the passage of four hundred years inside his body?

"When Shôichirô came to, he was in a bed inside a house in a fishing village.

"His travels through time were over even before he knew it. He was washed ashore on the outskirts of Constantinople, the Turkish capital, on the shores of the Bosporus.

"Your father did not talk about the days leading up to his becoming a solder in the Turkish army. However, he must have endured terrible anguish: learning a foreign tongue, earning the respect of an army filled with ruffians. My ancestor left these words about your father:

" 'He was a true warrior, who was full of life and never once revealed his suffering.'

"However, even a warrior must accept his mortality. Only half a day after my ancestor had found him, he died. But first, my ancestor was asked that if he or one of his descendants should live to see the day when it became possible to travel across great distances freely to other countries to please give this to his wife and son, or at least to a blood relative. He gave this dagger and hair to my ancestor. Many years have passed, and

I am here to fulfill the wishes of my ancestor and your father."

The count looked down at the cup in front of him.

"It is not in my character to talk this much. They say a man should speak three words in three years. I'm a little thirsty. I do not drink alcohol, but I will have this."

He took the cup and gulped the liquid. Mother and son stared. Although it had been a while since Sayo had poured the green tea, it was still very hot. It was certainly hot enough to scald anyone's mouth.

But the count put down the cup as if nothing were the matter.

"It's delicious. And far better than black tea or coffee. It seems to cleanse the stomach."

"Did you have any idea how you might find us when you left your country?" Sayo asked.

"My ancestor wrote down the address four hundred years ago. But with the passing years, the paper and ink had aged badly. The writing was illegible by the time it had reached the generation before mine. So I had no clues to help me.

"Except that any descendant of Minazuki Shôichirô was certain to be a true warrior. I was not mistaken in that."

The man looked upon Daigo almost sympathetically. Was this the same man who had defeated his master, Kashiwabara Isanosuke, so convincingly at Renbei-jyuku? Daigo felt confused and a little proud at the same time.

Beside him, Sayo quietly wiped her eyes with a sleeve.

"I've finally achieved the one goal that brought me to this country. Please, be well. And now, I'll excuse myself," he said, as he started to go.

"But I haven't served you a thing. Please, at least have some sake . . ."

Sayo seemed confused, having forgotten that the count had said earlier that he did not drink.

"Please don't bother."

"We may live in a shack, but I can't allow a guest who has come from a great distance with news of my husband to leave without showing him my gratitude. Daigo, please go out and buy some sake."

Daigo was not well. She had forgotten even that.

"Of course." Daigo got up. "I'll be right back, so please—"

Despite the count's protests, Daigo went out.

Sayo also implored him to stay awhile, but the count said grimly, "I am sorry, but I can only move around at night. I must go out now for my meal." Looking at Sayo intently, he said, "So this is where Minazuki Shôichirô lived. Then this is the home of a warrior. In my eyes, it is a golden palace."

Sayo's expression changed. She was not angry. She sensed that the count's words were genuine.

"Please apologize to your son for my abrupt departure."

The count stepped out into the entranceway and put on his shoes. Remembering something, he reached inside his cloak with his right hand.

"Oh yes, I nearly forgot. Your husband entrusted me with one more thing. Please take this."

He set a bundle wrapped in a purple cloth at the edge of the tatami. And then the count bowed deeply and left.

2

When Saigô Shirô arrived at Renbei-jyuku at six o'clock, some light remained in the western sky. But there was no sign of his teacher Jigorô, even though he had said he would stop by later.

"Oh, well."

He went behind Renbei-jyuku and hid around a corner to the south where he could monitor the house.

He waited, and as the minutes became hours, it was now around midnight by Shirô's guess.

The rain clouds, which had come in the afternoon, had blown away by nightfall, and now a beautiful moon lit the night sky. Even from a distance, Shirô could see a great many things. He had made it a part of his training to practice fighting on moonless nights with only the stars to see by.

"Sensei sure is late," he muttered to himself for the fiftieth time. A horse-drawn cab came from the direction of Ochanomizu and pulled up 165 to 200 feet away from Renbei-jyuku. Jigorô emerged and stepped out into the light of a nearby lamp.

After the cab drove away, Shirô tried to go out to greet his teacher, but Jigorô gestured for him to stay where he was. Although he was not a big man, he had lately put on some weight, and there was almost a swagger to his leisurely walk. He made his way with agile steps toward Shirô. The sight of him awed Shirô. So this is what a seasoned martial artist looked like.

Noticing the black leather bag in Jigorô's hand, Shirô offered, "Let me take that for you."

But shaking his head, Jigorô shot a hard look toward the fence of the Kashiwabara mansion.

"Anything out of the ordinary?" he asked.

"No, nothing."

"It's still early. But he must be awake by now."

"Who?"

"Count Dracula."

"Huh?" Shirô was confused. Here he was spying on Renbei-jyuku like he was some kind of detective. And now, something about the count . . .

"Please explain, Sensei."

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you. I couldn't believe it myself. How such a devil could ever exist . . ."

Jigorô's expression became stiff.

"Sensei, who are you talking about?"

Shirô watched Jigorô's face slowly tilting upward.

Shirô followed his stare.

Something big flew across the dark sky.

"It's a bat," Shirô said, looking back at Jigorô. Jigorô's hand was raised, which made Shirô look again.

"It's him," Jigorô said.

"But that's just a—"

"According to Transylvanian legend, he is said to change his form into a bat."

"Huh?" He snapped his head back to his teacher, but seeing his face, Shirô looked for the bat again. He watched it circle above Renbei-jyuku two or three times. Then it dropped and disappeared behind the fence.

"Sensei, I think the bat landed in the yard."

"Let's go, Shirô," said Jigorô as he ran out. Shirô chased after him, puzzled.

Shirô thought they were headed for the entrance, but Jigorô shouted, "Hide over by the fence!"

"Huh?" said Shirô. But his teacher's voice sounded so urgent that he ran full speed ahead, overtaking Jigorô, and squatted down in front of the fence.

Without slowing down, Jigorô put a foot on Shirô's back and leaped into the air. He jumped easily over the fence, which was nearly ten feet high, and landed in the yard.

"Amazing, Sensei," Shirô said, unable to hide his amazement. At the same time, he kicked the ground.

He had once fought some men who knew an old style of jujitsu. Every time these gigantic men had thrown him, he had astonished them by spinning in the air and landing nimbly on his feet like a cat. Shirô had learned this by watching a cat fall from a roof, and now he jumped as if he were a cat himself.

Although it was impossible to simply jump over the fence, he put one hand on the top and swung himself over, like an upside-down pendulum, in one quick move.

Neither man had made a sound when he landed.

"Let's go." Jigorô gestured toward the main house, apparently not having given a thought to the possibility that the fence might hinder Shirô.

They were surrounded by bamboo trees.

The Kashiwabara property was three hundred tsubo in size. In the spacious yard was a large pond and bamboo groves, such as the one they were standing in.

All the windows of the Kashiwabara house were dark.

Shirô said anxiously, "Sensei, is this allowed? It looks like we're—"

"We're not breaking in. We're trying to help someone," Jigorô answered. "I admit this is strange. But we have no choice, given who we are up against."

"Is the count nearby?"

Jigorô walked through the grove without answering.

"Damn!"

It was the first time Shirô had ever heard his teacher's voice filled with such shock and fear.

Shirô looked to the side and gasped.

One hundred feet away, on the western edge of the pond, stood two shadows.

It was a girl in a white gown and a man in black.

Although the girl's face was visible, the man had his back turned and his face hidden.

"Sensei, they're kissing," Shirô blurted out. Just then, from a window behind where the girl stood, appeared another girl's face.

The girl in the window cried, "Akane!"

It was Chizuru.

Akane fell to the ground like a wilted flower.

The man spun around. Behind the black sleeve covering his face, two crimson orbs burned. They were eyes.

"Somebody help!" Chizuru screamed.

The man ran about twenty feet and kicked the earth.

Shirô swallowed. He couldn't believe it. The man had transformed into a bat.

"Sensei!?"

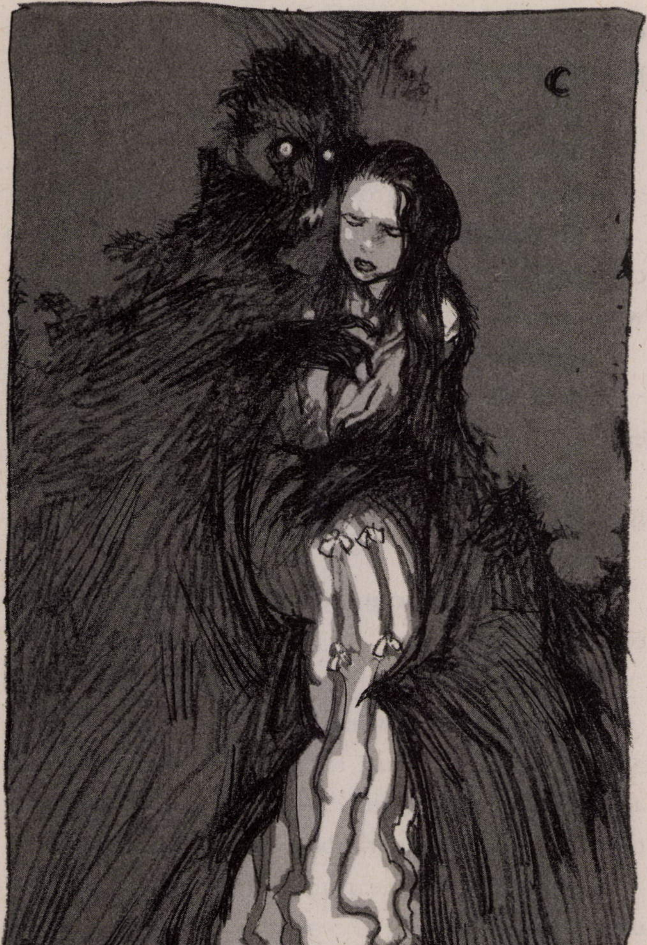
"Chase him. He can't stay that way for long. Find out where he lives."

"If it's the count, he lives—"

"No, he must be aware that I know who he is from our earlier conversation. He has most likely moved to another place. Chase him, but try to avoid a confrontation. Your judo skills will be useless against him."

Shirô didn't like hearing that his judo skills were useless, but he did not question his master.

He went back to the fence and cleared it just as easily as he had the first time.



Once back on the street, he looked up and saw the bat flutter away toward the west.

"You won't get away."

As he broke into a sprint, he was stunned by a realization: his teacher had ordered him to wear shoes instead of sandals because he had foreseen all this.

One of the students, a boarder at the Kashiwabara house, carried Akane inside.

Chizuru had been saddened when her father had been admitted to the hospital, but now she thought that perhaps it was a blessing in disguise.

She asked several students to stand guard around the house and yard and sent out a hired hand to fetch the family doctor. Then the doorbell rang.

The maid went to answer the door and returned immediately.

"Sensei Kanô is here."

Chizuru's eyes became round.

"He said he's coming from a meeting and stopped by for a visit."

He had, of course, slipped over the fence soon after Shirô had left, and, after watching the students come out, he boldly made his appearance at the door.

Chizuru felt her suspicion give way to happiness. That Kanô Jigorô had studied medicine informally in his youth was common knowledge, which was why the old jujitsu masters had criticized him—a scholar trying to become a martial artist!

He was led into the one Western-style room in the Kashiwabara mansion. Seeing Akane lying in bed, Jigorô asked everyone but Chizuru to step out of the room.

"What happened?"

Chizuru explained. "I couldn't sleep because of what happened to my father. I noticed that the house had suddenly become very cold. There was a draft, so I went out into the hall to see if any of the windows were open. That's when I noticed the door to this room was open."

Although it was dark inside the room, the moonlight was enough for her to see that Akane's bed was empty. And the window was open. Ignoring the cold wind, Chizuru went to the window to see where her sister had gone.

At the edge of the pond, Akane was embracing the man in black.

The rest Jigorô knew all too well.

He focused his eyes on a single point.

The opening of the gown . . . at Akane's throat.

There were two puncture wounds on the girl's pale throat and dried blood that had trickled down from the wounds.

"Right above the carotid artery," Jigorô said softly so that Chizuru would not hear.

3

After ten minutes, Shirô had lost sight of the bat.

He looked around and listened hard for a sign of it.

From the right, inside the shrine grounds where there were black trees that looked like smokestacks, he heard a faint screeching sound.

"There you are."

Running up the stone steps, he looked around again.

Suddenly something hit his shoulder. It had come from the sky. Before he could react, he smelled an animal smell, and a sharp pain in his neck.

"Damn!" He felt something furry on his shoulder.

It was the bat. Shirô realized it was a trap. It had flown high above and out of his sight; and when Shirô had stopped to look around, it had folded its wings and dropped on his shoulders. It was so the sound of its wings flapping would not give it away. And now it had its fangs in Shirô's neck.

“Damn you! Get away!” He tried to wrench it off him, but it did not budge. He could not get a grip on its soft body.

Something began to dribble down his neck. Shirô staggered a little, almost blacking out. The chain around his neck spun.

A screech.

It flapped away and quickly gained altitude. Bracing himself to keep from falling unconscious, Shirô looked up at the sky and saw the black shadow almost graze the face of the moon.

He held his savior in the palm of his hand.

It was the gold crucifix Jigorô had given him. His senses were so dull he did not notice the change in his body. But he found out when he gripped the crucifix in his hands.

The doctor concluded that Akane was anemic, owing to severe blood loss, but the cause was unknown. In all Tokyo—in all of Japan, for that matter—the only person who knew the cause was probably Kanô Jigorô.

“She should eat some beef or eel to get her energy back. No need to worry.”

Five minutes after the ignorant doctor had left, Akane woke up.

"Akane, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

Though there was something hollow and cloying about the way she spoke, Chizuru was relieved, thinking it was just the anemia. *She must be better if she's talking.*

"No, Akane. You must be still."

Akane smiled a little.

Chizuru noticed the sharp canine teeth peeking out of her mouth, and she wondered if they had always been that long. They were like fangs.

Akane sat up.

Chizuru put a hand on her shoulder and tried to push her back down, but, like a wall, Akane could not be budged.

How cold her body is. Like a corpse.

Chizuru quickly let go.

"I want to see him," Akane said. Her eyes were red.

"Who?"

"Minazuki . . . Daigo . . . sama."

"Akane-san . . ."

"I've always liked him. . . . Didn't you know . . . sister?"

"No."

She couldn't believe it—that her cheerful sister had feelings for Daigo and had kept it hidden. How she must have suffered.

Before Chizuru could say anything, Akane said, "I'm going . . . to see . . . Daigo-sama. . . ."

Akane got out of bed and started to walk slowly toward the door, before Chizuru could stop her.

Jigorô stood between her and the door. It would be nothing for the founder of Kôdôkan, who had fought against the jujitsu establishment to start a new martial arts discipline, to stop a sixteen-year-old girl.

When he tried to grab her wrist, it was she who grabbed his.

He was frozen by intense pain and extreme cold.

In the next instant, Akane had swung her arm and sent the founder of judo crashing helplessly into the wall.

"Akane, what are you doing?"

Akane turned to her sister, who tried to come near her.

The face that Chizuru saw was pale, with eyes that burned crimson and fangs jutting from an open mouth.

It was the face of evil.

"Get out of my way!" she said, aiming for her sister's throat. She was about to pounce on her like an animal, when Jigorô came at her from the side and thrust out a golden crucifix.

It was Akane who was frozen this time.

"You have been possessed by the devil."

Akane retreated backward toward the bed, as Jigorô stepped closer.

"But it's not too late. We will try to save you from the devil's embrace."

Without a sound, Akane trembled at the side of the bed.

Jigorô had pressed the crucifix against her forehead.

The smell and sound of burning flesh filled the room.

When Jigorô removed the crucifix, the mark of the cross was burned clearly on her forehead. Although she had tried to avert her eyes, Chizuru saw it all.

Akane collapsed on the bed as a plume of smoke rose up from her forehead.

"Sensei, what has happened to my sister?" Chizuru asked. She felt as if she were trapped in a nightmare.

Jigorô did not answer as he continued to look over Akane. It was not until she had fallen asleep and was breathing regularly that he finally stepped away with a look of relief.

"Sensei . . ."

Jigorô nodded, looking at Chizuru and then back at Akane. "I never thought such a thing could happen in this city and with the twentieth century approaching. . . . Please, listen and try to stay calm.

"A vampire has sucked your sister's blood."

Chizuru was in a daze as she listened. *A vampire? What is a vampire?*

He might have read her mind, because he continued by explaining, "Western legend has it that they were vengeful ghosts that live for hundreds of years by sucking the blood of humans. Although they are ghosts, they have a physical form, so they are able to touch and be touched. In other words, they are not quite immortal: even though they can survive for hundreds of years, they can be killed. I learned about it from a doctor friend who likes to study European lore, since I have an interest myself in this sort of thing."

"Oh . . ."

Chizuru stared hard at this man who still looked so youthful.

She could not believe that such a rational and practical man—as rational and practical as the judo techniques he taught—could have any interest in such absurdities.

Composing her thoughts, she asked, "What will become of my sister? How can I help her to get better?"

For a moment, Jigorô was silent, his face clouded with doubt. But then he reached a decision, looked at Chizuru, and smiled.

"There is only one way to cure your sister: we must destroy the vampire that sucked her blood."

"How?"

"By driving a stake through its heart. A knife would also work."

A terrible thought rose up in her mind. She must not ask, she thought to herself, but she had to.

"And if we can't destroy it . . . what will happen to my sister?"

"She will probably go on living, in the same state as you see her now. But the horrible thing about vampires— Now you must listen carefully. I should be telling this to your father, but at present you are the head of the household, and, since you seem to be a resilient girl, I will tell you instead. The most terrible thing about vampires is that they infect others with their evil. Those who have died from having their blood sucked will come back to life as vampires themselves unless their bodies are cremated. It hasn't come to that yet with your sister, but if he kisses her one more time, she might become one of them."

She fainted. Jigorô caught her before she fell to the floor.

Just when he was thinking he should take her somewhere else, she opened her eyes and pulled away.

"I'm fine. Really. But, Sensei, help my sister. Please help Akane."

He nodded and gently held her as she sobbed in his arms.

"There will be a battle such as the world has never seen before. But I will try my best, not only for your sister's sake but also to protect the lives and souls of the people of Japan."

A voice from behind said, "We will do it, Sensei. I will help you."

"Shirô."

Jigorô turned around. Though certainly a prodigy, his apprentice was still young and had so much to learn—but never had his teacher seen him looking more reliable and strong. Shirô walked past Jigorô and Chizuru and went to Akane's bedside, holding his hand to his neck. He looked down upon her face, which still bore the mark of the crucifix on the forehead.

"Sensei, I'm sorry, but I was caught by surprise," he said with his back turned to them.

"What?" Jigorô's eyes grew wider.

"I was listening in on everything you said about the vampire. Sensei, do you think we can find him again?"

"Yes, I do," replied Jigorô. His voice sounded very hoarse. "Barring extraordinary circumstances, vampires tend to go after the same victim until they've made that person one of them. And they are fearless. Even if Dracula knows we have discovered his true identity, and that we're waiting for him, he will not be afraid to show himself."

Chizuru moaned.

"I hope he does . . . for Akane-san's sake, and for mine."

Shirô removed the hand from his neck. At the same time, he grabbed his collar and pulled it down.

Jigorô could not speak, and Chizuru turned her face away.

Shirô had the same puncture wounds on his throat as Akane did. And on his hand was the mark of the crucifix that had been seared into his leathery palm when he had warded off the bat.

It was the same mark as Akane's—the very same mark that signified that she had been possessed.

That night, there had been two victims at the hands of the cursed vampire.

No.

In truth, there were three.

Chapter Five

THE DEATHLY BEAUTY UNDER THE MOON

1

September 24, 188–, 5:00 P.M.

Lower Niban-chô, Kôjimachi Ward, Tokyo

The rain that had started around noon had only grown heavier by dusk.

But it wasn't the rain alone that had mired the house in gloom.

Minazuki Daigo was sitting alone next to a dead body.

Since the night before, the house had been filled with the smell and smoke of incense; and a smoky haze covered the flowers and gifts the neighbors had bought with their meager earnings.

He had been thinking about his mother, Sayo.

But not of the days they had spent together. He had sealed those memories away when he had discovered her body on the street only two chô west of their home two nights ago.

Before he lost himself in memories, there were things to be done—and a mystery to solve.

How had his mother lost every drop of blood in her body?

Was the count responsible?

And if it wasn't him, why had two hundred foreign coins been left at his mother's feet?

After having been told to get some sake, Daigo had gone to Densuke—a hard-drinking plasterer—and borrowed a bottle. When he had returned, his mother was not there. Even more unsettling was that Count Dracula was also missing. After searching in and around the house for an hour, he had found her.

He had carried her to Dr. Niide Ryojô, who ministered to the people in the row houses, but she was already gone.

The cause of death had made the doctor immediately suspicious, so he sent for the police. From that night until about noon the next day, Daigo had been subjected to brutal interrogation until his neighbors' testimony had cleared him of suspicion. When Daigo's landlord had gone to Renbei-jyuku to report what happened, a recovered Isanosuke wrote a letter to the superintendent of police, which had proven effective in getting Daigo released almost immediately. It would have even spared Sayo's body from a grisly autopsy, but Daigo had wanted it to proceed.

How could he even comprehend that his mother was dead, when she had been alive only an hour before?

By evening, the coroner had released the autopsy report, from which they learned nothing they had not suspected before: that the cause of death was extreme and unnatural blood loss. When Daigo asked about the blood, the coroner and the police could only scratch their heads.

They had not found any sign of blood between the house and the street where Sayo's corpse had been discovered.

In fact, there had been no sign of a struggle, and the body was completely unmarked.

The extraordinary detail that Daigo reported had been the two bite marks on the right side of her neck, but the wounds were so small that they were ruled out as the cause of such a high volume of blood loss. In the end, the coroner assumed that a fox or raccoon had bitten her after her death.

Needless to say, Count Dracula had also been investigated. After Daigo had told the police the man's address, they visited the former trader's mansion, but it was already empty.

If he called himself a count, he was undoubtedly a nobleman. The police had asked what business such an important man could possibly have with a samurai's family from the row houses. And when Daigo could answer only that the count must have known his father who had gone overseas, the police grew only more skeptical. While their suspicions were eventually put to rest by the letter sent by the House of Peers representative Kashiwabara Isanosuke, there were others who had been paralyzed by the news of Sayo's death.

"Excuse us." Chizuru, wearing black, opened the door and entered.

Daigo reacted visibly when he saw the two people who followed her.

"Oh! Sensei Kanô and Shirô—I mean, Saigô-kun."

He thanked them for coming and bowed without taking his eyes off them.

He said to Chizuru, "Thank you for coming this afternoon."

He bowed again.

She had already visited earlier in the afternoon to offer incense. She had also been the first at Renbeijyuku to hear the news and had asked her father to write a letter to the superintendent of police. And she had not stopped there.

"After you told me how your mother was found, I notified Sensei Kanô. We did not understand everything when we first heard the news."

Jigorô said, "We wanted to pay our respects this afternoon, but it took some time to gather information, as well as a few other things we'll need. Nevertheless, please allow me to offer some incense."

After Jigorô, Shirô had also respectfully burned incense at the altar. Afterward, Jigorô turned to Daigo.

"Now we must tell you something of grave importance—something you will find very hard to believe. Can we close the door?" he asked.

Their eyes met, and Daigo nodded.

"Shirô."

At Jigorô's bidding, Shirô closed the shoji door; and the darkness enveloped them in an instant. The only light was what seeped in from the window and the dim illumination from the paper lantern next to the body.

"I'm going to ask you to listen to what I am about to tell you without getting angry, no matter how absurd it may sound. But first, Minazuki-kun, will you examine your mother's body with me?"

"What is the meaning of this?"

Jigorô nodded and smiled warmly in spite of Daigo's hardened expression.

"This young lady told me about the two wounds on your mother's neck. Her sister, who has taken ill, also has the same wounds on her throat."

Daigo looked at Chizuru, who nodded.

"Daigo-san," Shirô called out. When Daigo turned around, Shirô moved the bandage wrapped around his neck.

"You, too . . . like my mother . . . Sensei Kanô, what is this?"

"May I see your mother?"

"Well, all right."

Daigo stood up and went to where his mother lay. He waited for Jigorô to follow, then removed the white cloth from her face.

"See it?" Jigorô asked, as a way of seeking confirmation.

"Yes."

"But this will soon disappear."

"What?"

"Minazuki-kun, please do not think I am trying to sully your mother's memory. This may not be the best time to tell you, but because of what happened to your mother, I cannot stay silent. Shirô and Chizuru-san have spoken highly of your character, and, after just a few brief moments, I can see for myself that you are a good man. So perhaps you will be understanding when I tell you, Minazuki-kun, that your mother will soon rise from the dead."

Chizuru and Shirô looked at the two men. Jigorô had just uttered an absurdity. But Daigo did not look surprised; instead, his eyes gleamed intensely.

"Sensei, is this a bad joke?"

"I understand if you're angry, but please just listen. Shirô, how did you get that mark on your throat?"

The diminutive judo prodigy was standing in front of the shoji door.

"Daigo-san, I would never lie to you. I got this wound from the same man who sucked Akane-san's blood two nights ago. He turned himself into a bat and attacked me."

Daigo was now in a daze. Chizuru added, "My sister, Akane, has the same puncture wounds. Her illness is caused by severe blood loss, just like your mother's."

Crossing his arms, Daigo closed his eyes.

It was clear that beneath his calm exterior, a fierce battle was being fought.

"Was the same man responsible for what happened to my mother and Akane-san?" he asked, keeping his eyes closed.

"It was Count Dracula."

Daigo reacted as if he had expected that answer. Nevertheless, he said, "It's so hard to believe. He seemed like such a dignified and respectable man."

"It's no wonder. He was a brave general who almost single-handedly saved his country, Wallachia, from countless invading armies. On the other hand, that was four hundred years ago."

Daigo looked stricken. He asked, "Please tell me what happened to Shirô-kun and Akane-san on that night."

An hour passed.

First Jigorô, then Daigo, recounted the whole story of their respective meetings with Count Dracula.

The sound of driving rain outside grew louder, just as the enveloping gloom grew even darker.

"To be honest, I still can't believe it," Daigo said, looking intently at Jigorô. "Assuming this vampire exists, is it safe to leave Akane-san alone?"

"The *Shitennô* are looking after her," Jigorô replied. A small object shone in his hand. "They seemed a little annoyed when Chizuru-san gave them these. I hope they haven't taken them off. I've also taken measures so that no one can enter or leave the house. There's no need to worry."

2

"It hurts. . . . Please . . . someone open the window. . . . Help me. . . ."

The cries had continued since sundown. Three hours had already passed. In that time, Akane had suffered and sobbed and begged for someone to open the window.

It had pained them at first to see her suffer, but that feeling gave way to suspicion when she continued to wail endlessly.

Finally they understood why Chizuru had insisted with such hard looks that they not open the windows. She had commanded them not to open the windows or doors until morning, no matter how much Akane suffered.

"What a stench!" said Norizuki, one of the *Shitennô,* pinching his nose as he stood outside Akane's door. The unmistakable smell of garlic assaulted him. "You can still smell it from out here. It must smell like a Chinese restaurant kitchen inside."

"Akane-san has been crying for three hours in there. This is a cruel thing to do, no matter what anyone says," said Nobi, one of the *Shitennô* who had feelings for Akane.

"It can't be helped. These were the doctor's orders. But I agree: she has been crying for a long time."

The two exchanged a look.

When they had heard that Akane had been taken ill from the shock of seeing a burglar in the yard, they had gladly agreed to stand guard for the night. Nevertheless, they could hardly bear the smell of the garlic, which they had been told came from the medicine.

Needless to say, neither they nor the other two in the yard—Daidôji and Otsuka—knew that Kanô Jigorô had rubbed garlic juice around the window and on the windowsill when he had visited in the late afternoon. Nor did they know that Akane's hands and legs were bound so that she could not break the window.

"This stench is getting to me. It's more like a magic spell than a medical treatment."

Perhaps tired of hearing Norizuki complain, Nobi changed the subject.

"Too bad about Minazuki having tuberculosis."

Norizuki nodded sadly. "Yeah. If he was chosen to succeed sensei at Renbei-jyuku, I would have congratulated him with open arms. But I guess there's no chance of that now."

"Even if he was, he would never accept it."

"Why not?"

"He's not the type to manage a dojo. He only has a mind to improve his skill. He would even leave Chizuru-san and Renbei-jyuku if they got in the way—like a true swordsman. He was born in the wrong era."

"Hey, what about me?"

"Could you give up everything for the sword?"

"No."

Norizuki slumped his shoulders. Nobi's expression became mournful.

"To have tuberculosis so young . . . What a fate!"

"Hey, don't be such a doomsayer."

"When we were kids, we witnessed the end of the shogunate. I guess the god of destruction is out to get every one of the true samurai."

"What did I tell you about—" Norizuki complained, but Nobi ignored him.

"Didn't you notice?"

"Notice what?"

"That European noble who came to the dojo two days ago . . . the one who called himself Count Dracula."

"Yeah. It was his bastard of a servant who defeated us. He will pay dearly for that the next time he comes."

Without any regard to Norizuki, who bared his teeth in a show of hostility, Nobi went on, "He was . . . kind of similar."

"To who?" Norizuki lashed out.

But before Nobi could answer, they heard a voice from the other side of the one glass door whose shutters they had decided to leave open.

"Who's there?"

Otsuka's low, penetrating voice rang out.

Thinking that an enemy threat could come only from outside, the two men opened the glass door and ran out into the yard with their hands on their swords.

Otsuka and Daidôji were already poised with their swords drawn.

A black shadow stood before them at the edge of the pond.

He wore a squarish hat, a muffler, and a cloak. Two crimson pools glistened inside the black face covered in darkness. They were eyes.

"He's here."

Akane's voice came from the window.

"You came for me, my love . . . my master. Look, look, sister! You can have Daigo-sama. This man is my true love."

So focused were they on the mysterious man in front of them, the four men could only hear parts of what she had said.

"Who are you?" Daidôji asked. "If you are a burglar, we are busy with other matters. Leave now, and we will let you go. But if you are after someone in this house . . ."

The shadow took a bold step forward.

"Why don't you speak?"

"No matter. We will cut you down!"

The swords of the four men gleamed in the moonlight.

The shadow's relentless advance froze the *Shitennô.* As if to break the tension, Otsuka, fourth dan, swung his sword.

"Iyyeehh!"

It was a technique called *reppû,* a swing of the blade so fast even the sword's shadow could not keep up.

The blade was deflected, hitting something and making a pure sound. It had hit a walking stick the man had concealed in his cloak. But the man was so powerful that he had deflected the blade, which had come at him with the full weight of the swordsman behind it, and sent the warrior back along with his sword.

The others watched Otsuka stagger back and drop his sword on the ground. Then they remembered the secret weapon Chizuru had given them.

But their pride as swordsmen smoldered.

"Come on!"

"Yeah!"

Without a sound, the four men scattered and surrounded the man, who stood perfectly still.

"Don't worry. We won't gang up on you," said Norizuki. "We'll take you on one at a time. My turn first."

A deep laugh welled up from inside the man.

"What's so funny?"

"Die!"

Angling the blade to the right, Norizuki swung down. It was a technique called *onhyakushu,* which allowed the swordsman to adapt quickly to the enemy's moves. However, the blade missed his shoulder and sliced the air. The enemy had seen the attack coming and had easily evaded the blade.

"Bastard . . ."

Burning with hatred, Norizuki looked . . .

Right into the crimson eyes of the enemy.

Bam! A clean hit had jarred the brain inside his skull, and Norizuki fell unconscious.

What had happened? Before the remaining three could react, the man had turned around once. Not his whole body but only from the neck up.

The window opened and Akane leaned out.

Excited by the impending reunion, she had broken free of the rope that had bound her hands and legs. Blood oozed from her wrists.

"You came for me, my love," she said, just as longingly as if she were truly talking to her lover.

And from the window, Akane thrust out her arms.

The man grabbed her arms, pressing his lips against them.

"Ohhh," she moaned in ecstasy.

He swept her up from the window, and the two disappeared deeper into the yard.

Thirty minutes passed before the *Shitennô* recovered consciousness. The maid and butler had noticed a cold wind blowing inside the house, found them outside, and had shaken them awake.

Out of Nobi's and Daidôji's sleeves fell the secret weapons they hadn't even bothered to wear and which had therefore gone unused. They were small rosaries.

Around the same time, there was another strange phenomenon at the house at Kôjimachi.

It happened after Daigo, then Chizuru and Shirô, and finally even Jigorô had dozed off.

The sound of rain makes people sleepy. The monotonous sound lulls them into a kind of calm. The effect was even more pronounced if they were already as tired as Daigo and Chizuru were, but it was strange that Shirô and even Jigorô had fallen asleep. It was as if something sinister inside the house had put them under a spell.

Daigo was nodding off, sitting next to his mother's body. There was a crack, and his eyes fluttered open. Like a true swordsman, he had sensed a deathly presence.

The noise had come from the body's chest area, where a dagger had been placed to ward off evil spirits.

Although there was nothing unusual about the knife, Daigo noticed that the white cloth, which had been covering the corpse's face, had moved down to just above where the knife lay.

Evidently, the others had not heard the noise. After making sure they were breathing properly, Daigo put the cloth back over his mother's face and lit another incense stick to replace the one that had almost gone out.

Having finished the ritual, he was lulled once again into a deep sleep.

His instincts told him something was wrong, and it was instinct again that moved his hand.

Darkness swamped his consciousness. Suddenly he felt a burning pain on the back of his left hand. His eyes fluttered open. Letting go of the incense pressed against the back of his hand, he looked at the body.

A terrible shiver ran down his spine.

His mother was sitting upright.

A feeling of joy came over him, but only for a fleeting moment.

Is this really my strong and gentle mother?

She was gazing at him with blood-red eyes, and she smiled an evil smile. Two fiendish fangs stuck out from her mouth, which was split open from ear to ear.

Daigo came to his senses, hearing a voice in his mind.

Your mother died because a vampire sucked her blood. She will come back to life as a vampire.

A knife!

He reached for the sword rack in the corner, but he froze.

I can't move. Her eyes!

He had lost the ability to move the moment he had seen her eyes.

"Daigo."

It was his mother's lips that moved. It was his mother's voice. And yet it was not: the voice had nothing of his mother's warmth. It was cold enough to make him tremble.

"I can't move my body because the knife is on me. Come here."

A blue hand beckoned him closer.

Daigo slid closer to his mother, knowing that he should not.

A cold hand held his neck. He felt at peace, as though he were floating on water.

"I hadn't noticed when I was your mother—"

He heard Sayo's voice in his ear. Her cold breath on his neck caused the nape of his neck to tense.

"When I see you now, I see a strong young man. And how delicious that beautiful neck looks. And those blue veins. The hot blood that must flow through those veins. Daigo, your mother desires your blood."

Sayo's red lips drew closer to his neck.

But in the next instant—

"Hee!" she cried out, pushing Daigo away. With both hands on the futon, she shrank back in fear.

Daigo regained his senses. At the same time, he felt the presence of the other three behind them. Jigorô let out a shout as Chizuru screamed. The spell had been broken.

Daigo saw hate and terror twisting his mother's face. Sayo looked at the knife lying on her lap. No one had touched it, but the knife had slipped halfway out of its sheath, and Sayo's face was reflected in the blade.

A protective knife was placed on a dead body to ward off evil spirits, and, in an instant, Daigo realized what had happened. His mother had tried to get up earlier, but the knife had prevented it. The evil spirit was powerless against the holy object.

Sayo had tried to slip out of the futon, but her lower half would not move. It was because of the knife resting on her lap.

Daigo had been freed from the spell of the evil eye.

He leaped for the sword rack and grabbed a sword. He looked for an opportunity to strike.

3

The hand on the hilt did not move, but it was not the evil eye that stopped it. While she may have become a vampire, she was still his mother.

"Minazuki-kun, I'll handle this," Jigorô said from behind.

"Sensei—"

"You must not do this. You should go outside."

Jigorô came to his side, gripping a large hammer used to break charcoal in his right hand and a one-shaku wooden stake in his left.

Only one thing can bring peace to a vampire's victim. Drive a stake into his heart.

Sayo tried to move away from Jigorô, but the knife kept her frozen in place.

"Please forgive me," he said in anguish, straddling her torso.

Sayo put her hands on his neck. She threw her head back and cried out. White smoke rose out of her right hand. It had touched the crucifix hanging from Jigorô's neck. Holy objects had the power to burn a body possessed by evil.

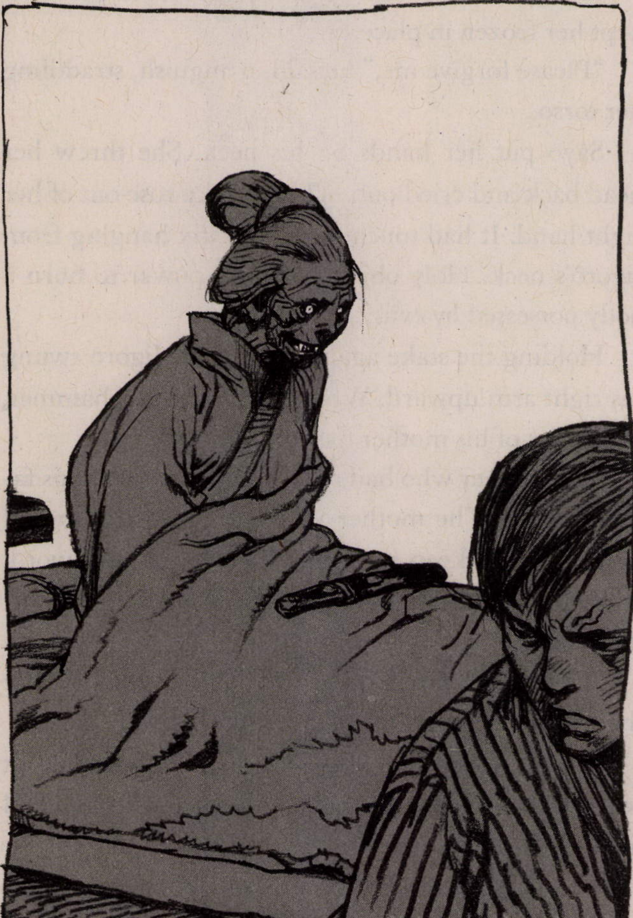
Holding the stake against her chest, Jigorô swung his right arm upward. When Daigo saw the hammer, memories of his mother flashed before his eyes.

The mother who had raised him alone after his father's death. The mother who had slapped him and urged him to keep pursuing the way of the sword, when he had decided to give up and work to support them both.

"No, stop! Sensei Kanô!" He started to move, but there was low moan from the entrance area.

It was a moan that sounded like his mother's. But when Daigo turned around, it was Shirô who attacked him. He flew through the air like a bat.

The only reason Daigo had not drawn his sword and cut him down in one swift move was because he had realized Shirô was not aiming for him.



Instead, he jumped on Jigorô's back like an insect and grabbed the right hand that held the hammer.

"What are you—? Shirô!"

"Sensei—don't do it."

"So! You are possessed! Move!"

Even with Shirô still holding his right hand, Jigorô spun downward.

It was a beautifully executed ippon-zeoi. Shirô's body was sent crashing against the wall—or not.

It was spine chilling. Bending his arms and legs like a spider, Shirô clung to the wall perpendicular to the tatami floor.

In the meantime, Sayo had slipped out from between Jigorô's legs. Jigorô, Daigo, and Chizuru all gasped at the same time.

The knife had been knocked off the futon when Jigorô had thrown Shirô.

"Mother!"

"Mother Minazuki!"

Evading Daigo's and Chizuru's outstretched arms like a lithe animal, Sayo rushed to the door.

The shoji door and shutter blew open and the darkness blew in. There was a dull thud, and a little boy screamed.

"That's Tankichi from next door!"

Daigo ran out with a sword in hand. Chizuru followed.

At the entrance to the house next door, Tankichi's mother was on the ground, and beyond that stood Sayo carrying Tankichi, who had passed out in terror.

Chizuru let out an anguished moan next to Daigo.

From the light leaking out of the entrance, they could just make out Sayo's silhouette.

She had the face of a demoness, her lips glistening with the blood that streamed down Tankichi's neck.

"Delicious." She licked her lips.

It was at this moment Daigo made up his mind to cut down the woman who stood before him.

Daigo drew the dagger hidden in his sword and threw it, aiming between her eyes.

Sayo's right hand moved in a flash and caught the dagger in front of her eyes.

"You would kill your own mother, you ungrateful boy!"

The voice was no longer that of his kindly mother.

Suddenly she held the boy up and threw him down mercilessly to the ground.

Tankichi let out a shriek and passed out again.

Daigo leaped toward her.

Sayo threw the dagger.

Daigo caught it with his sword. The dagger was not meant to be thrown like a shuriken; rather, it was meant to be used for whittling wood and cutting rope. The dagger was also too lightweight to cause serious injury, even when thrown.

But the dagger, which had whizzed out of Sayo's hand, had penetrated the hilt of Daigo's sword, slowing his swing for a split second.

The blade caught the hem of the kimono, tearing it. Sayo jumped almost twenty feet and stood at the edge of the street.

One by one, the neighbors opened their doors, having heard Tankichi's screams.

Daigo's face twisted in anguish. He did not want his neighbors to see his mother like this.

Maybe I should let her go . . .

His mind clouded for a moment, but then he caught a glimpse of Tankichi convulsing in pain.

No, my mother will claim no more victims.

Sayo turned her back on Daigo.

Creaturelike, she scampered toward the back door of the row houses. Daigo knew he would not be fast enough to stop her.

A scream. It was Sayo, who in fear had backed away from the door, which was crudely made out of wooden boards and sticks.

"What is . . . ?"

Chizuru explained to a surprised Daigo, "Sensei Kanô hung a crucifix here and on the front door, before we went to your house."

"Thank you," Daigo said quickly, before running after his mother.

Sayo turned around.

Daigo did not know why he closed his eyes. Was it to shield himself from the sight of his mother crazed with fear and hate, or to keep from falling under the spell of those crimson eyes?

"Daigo."

"Mother, forgive me."

Mother and son came together as one.

Daigo's precision with the sword was unequaled. The blade pierced her heart, and his mother died instantly, without even letting out one last scream.

Sayo crumpled to the ground, with Daigo falling to his knees beside her. He felt more pain than if he had plunged a sword into his own body.

Tears welled up in Daigo's eyes, and he began to cough uncontrollably. Blood dripped from between the fingers covering his mouth.

Chizuru rushed to his side.

The neighbors who had come outside could not make out a thing in the moonlight. Spotting the shadows gathered in the back, they started that way; but a lone figure came from behind, parted a way through the mob, and turned around.

The man shouted with the ferocity of a tiger, "I am with the police! Everyone go back inside your homes!"

It was the voice of the man who had presided over thousands of students and was at times on equal terms with ministers. It was the voice of Kanô Jigorô.

Chapter Six

THE ROKUMEIKAN FANTASY

1

September, 26, 188–, 10:00 A.M.
Upper Niban-chô, Kôjimachi Ward, Tokyo

It was the day after his mother's cremation that Daigo was invited to the Kanô school.

He was led into a Western-style room. Outside, the birds chirped, as if celebrating a beautiful day, and, nearby, *kiai* echoed from the dojo through which he had just passed.

Since the students of the Kanô school woke up at a quarter to five, ate breakfast at six, and then went to class, the only men left in the dojo were Kôdôkan's *Shitennô*.

Jigorô and Saigô Shirô, along with Chizuru, were already in the living room when Daigo arrived.

While Shirô was merely pale, with a bandage wrapped around his throat, Chizuru looked noticeably exhausted. It pained Daigo's heart terribly to know it was because her sister, Akane, had been kidnapped while Chizuru was at his house.

After carrying Sayo's body—the real Sayo this time—back inside the house, without attracting the neighbors' notice, Chizuru, Jigorô, and Shirô had rushed back to Renbei-jyuku.

Only the *Shitennô,* hanging their heads in shame, were there. Akane was nowhere to be found.

Chizuru had called the police with Jigorô to file a missing persons report, and then slept only a little before Sayo's funeral and cremation.

Although the police questioning had been relatively civil—after all, both Jigorô and her father knew the superintendent of police—the events of the day had exhausted Chizuru. Afterward, she fell into a deep sleep.

Only the fact that she was the daughter of an influential man had protected her. The police had been known to resort to torture, even of women, in order to coerce a confession.

"Thank you for coming," Jigorô began. He had not slept, but he did not look at all tired; he did not even have bags under his eyes.

Daigo bowed before him with great respect. Since the request had come from this man, Daigo had had no choice but to accept the invitation.

"Thank you for coming yesterday."

Jigorô and Shirô had also attended the funeral.

Only Tankichi and his mother had seen Sayo after she had become a vampire. It was even more fortunate that the events had been so shocking that Tankichi and his mother could not remember what had happened. The mother had even refused the box of sweets Daigo had brought with him when he had gone to apologize for what had happened to Tankichi.

He had explained to them that a burglar had broken into his house, probably in search of the condolence money, and had caused a scare before escaping. And with that, the matter had been settled.

"After the funeral yesterday, I went to the count's mansion, but it was completely empty."

"But you said something about a hideout?"

"He probably had several prepared before he even came to this country. He must have had someone here helping him. It may be his coach driver."

"Could he be the one who defeated the *Shitennô*?"

"I'm certain of it," Chizuru said. "One of the students who was there that day saw the driver waiting outside on the coach when the count came. He recognized the driver as the one who had fought the *Shitennô*."

"He must be the one helping the count."

"Do you think there is only one?" Daigo asked.

"I don't know, but I can't imagine there are more."

"But when and how did the count find someone to help him?"

Jigorô fell silent. He closed his eyes and crossed his arms. It was clear he was more distressed now than he had ever been during his struggle to spread the teachings of judo.

"I can't know for sure. But he must have found someone who was interested in European legends and contacted him somehow. After that, he can turn anyone into his servant with one look."

"But—who?"

Jigorô closed his eyes again.

Chizuru asked, "Can we find out by investigating the coach?"

"The police could certainly conduct such an investigation—but not if the driver owns the coach."

"Sensei Kanô," Daigo began, bringing his knees together. "I must be honest. Even after what happened to my mother, I still can't believe that Count Dracula was the one behind this."

"I know. Before his death, he was a magnificent general, one who could even have stood comparison with the finest general in our country. I would have liked to have known him—four hundred years ago."

Jigorô stretched his back and looked at the three of them. Then he began again. "In light of what you said, I'd like to tell you everything I know that might concern this incident. I had wanted to keep the fact of this evil man's arrival locked away, but I'm afraid that's no longer possible. But you must not reveal to anyone what I am about to tell you. It must follow you to your graves."

The three nodded. Sunlight filled the room.

"I first learned about vampires from a friend at Tokyo Imperial University who dabbled in magic and the occult. I liked him, even though he didn't know a thing about judo, and we used to spend the night at each other's boarding houses. Eventually, I became interested in his research."

Saigô Shirô was the one most shocked by this confession.

He did not think that this practical man, who had adapted old jujitsu principles and transformed them into a new martial art for the modern age, could be interested in something so ridiculous. Though he had heard about it a few times before—not only in Akane's room but also on several other occasions—it still surprised him every time.

Jigorô picked up an old book from the top of a stack nearby and flipped through the pages. "This book is *The Legend of Dracula in Europe*. The ones here on top are *The Magic Compendium*, *The Encyclopedia of Sorcery*, *Witchcraft for the Ages*—all bought during my school days. They all contain detailed information about vampires and Count Dracula.

"According to these books, vampires are evil spirits that have existed since the beginning of human history. They start out as ghosts but take visible form when they suck the blood of a victim and possess his body. The most frightening part about them is that their evil is contagious. Anyone whose blood is sucked out of them by a vampire will die and come back to life as a vampire, like Minazuki-kun's mother."

While Chizuru looked at him sorrowfully, Daigo felt grateful for Jigorô's directness.

There was no way to avoid talking about what had happened to his mother. If it must be done, he would have felt better if people talked about it, as Jigorô just had.

"If I had let my mother go, then what do you think would have happened to her?"

"She would have wandered the night in search of fresh human blood. She would have sucked the blood of any man or woman, young or old. I read in one German book that vampires are even willing to drink the blood of a cow or dog."

"And does the cow turn into a vampire?"

"No, but the people who consume its meat do."

Chizuru tried to calm herself. Anyone who had ever tasted beef *nabe* would have been frozen stiff by this revelation.

"But there is another problem. Vampires do not age as long as they have fresh blood to feed on. The same goes for the victims who turn into vampires. And that is the most horrifying part; they are able to live forever and increase their numbers so long as they are able to drink human blood. For the terminally ill, who may not live to see tomorrow, or the madman, who covets eternal life, the prospect of becoming a vampire might actually be a dream come true. The coach driver might be one such man. Think about it. The prospect of death is what frightens men most. That someone would sell his soul to the devil to escape that fate doesn't surprise me in the least."

Jigorô paused to drink from his coffee cup.

"Plus, vampires have supernatural powers that humans do not. For example, the evil eye, which the count used to freeze Sensei Kashiwabara's movements, and the ability to turn into a bat, which he used to escape from Shirô. According to legend, they are also known to turn into fog or a wolf. Think about how Minazuki-kun's mother moved more like an animal than any human. I must admit, the vampire is a most intriguing creature."

"Sensei, don't say that!" Shirô shouted, a little too loudly.

Jigorô looked at the nape of his apprentice's neck. "By the way, when you tried to help Minazuki-kun's mother escape and when I threw you, you landed like a spider on the wall. Do you remember what you felt then?"

"Yes, of course."

"Tell me honestly."

"I felt as though I was freed from all of life's constraints. But—" Shirô hesitated.

"But?" Jigorô urged.

"I was overwhelmed by a feeling of contempt and hatred for anyone other than myself. I hungered for—I was going to kill you, Sensei."

"Do you think you could have?"

Shirô remained silent.

"Shirô. Answer me."

"Yes."

Jigorô nodded. "In my eyes, this world has never seen and will never see again a genius quite like you. Yamashita, Tomita, Yokoyama . . . they would all yield to you in a one-on-one match."

This was a fact that even the aforementioned Yamashita Yoshiaki, Tomita Tsunejirô, and Yokoyama Sakujirô, three of Kôdôkan's *Shitennô,* would have to acknowledge. Several years ago at a police-sponsored tournament, when the little warrior had used his indefensible *yama arashi* to defeat jujitsu masters twice his size, there had even been a song written about him.

"Shirô, I must ask. Did you think about wanting to become a vampire, if it meant you could defeat me?"

Daigo and Chizuru noticed Shirô's face break into a cold sweat.

"Sensei!"

Beads of sweat rolled down his cheeks, as Jigorô fixed a hawklike stare on him. Shirô closed his eyes, squeezing his knees tightly with both hands.

He opened his eyes, and said, "Sensei . . . I—still want to be a vampire!"

Chizuru swallowed hard, but Daigo had not moved.

"Fine." Jigorô nodded gravely. "It's just as you heard, Minazuki-kun. You know that Shirô was chosen as one of the *Shitennô,* in spite of his size, and you know his tolerance and self-control. And even he is vulnerable to the temptation of the powers he might have as a vampire. If I hadn't held out my crucifix, Shirô might have gladly turned against me."

"But that's because he was obsessed with being a vampire!" Chizuru blurted out in Shirô's defense. "It wasn't his conscious intention. Isn't that right, Daigo-sama?"

She had said it, expecting Daigo to agree with her. However, he did not answer and stared into his friend's face as Jigorô did, as if to look inside Shirô's heart.

"Shirô-kun, I have to ask. Could you beat Sensei Kanô if you were a vampire?"

"Daigo-sama!" Chizuru looked toward Jigorô, upset.

The judo founder didn't even furrow his brow; it was as if he had wanted to ask the question himself. Chizuru closed her eyes. These men lived in a different world than she did, and according to a different code.

"No need to worry." Jigorô had moved behind her and put a hand on her shoulder to reassure her. "The desire to be stronger is another feeling entirely from the desire to destroy this evil. Shirô has been possessed by the vampire, and he ties himself down at night inside a locked room. But as long as a cure is possible, he will not hesitate to drive a stake into Dracula's heart. And the same goes for Minazuki-kun."

"That's right. Please do not worry," said Shirô, smiling. Daigo also nodded.

"To be honest, I didn't want to involve you young people in this mess. I'm still troubled about it. The enemy's power surpasses my own, at least at night. He's already killed Minazuki-kun's mother, poisoned Shirô, and kidnapped Akane-san. We cannot allow him to have his way with us, and we can't allow others to know what is happening. If people were to find out, no one would sleep, and they might start driving a stake into just about every corpse. This is a fight for our lives and our souls. And we can rely only on the people who know the truth about what is happening. Of course, we'll enlist the help of the law without their knowing it. However, we three must be the ones to hunt down Dracula and the coach driver and destroy them. Can we agree to that?"

"Gladly." Daigo nodded. Jigorô stood up and grabbed his hand. Shirô put his hand above theirs. Their pact had been made.

And then something unexpected happened.

2

October 3, 188–, 5:30 P.M.
South Kôga-chô, Kanda Ward, Tokyo

As if it were already midnight, darkness had fallen, and then an unexpected visitor came to Renbei-jyuku. It was Niizuka Takako, the broker's plump young daughter.

But when Chizuru answered the door, what she saw shocked her.

Takako's face no longer possessed its characteristic roundness. She had become thin and pale, and her eyes had dark circles, as if someone had blotted ink beneath them. She said she was looking for Akane.

"I'm sorry. She is away in Fukuoka at our uncle's place," Chizuru lied. She figured Takako would leave, but she stood fidgeting, her face turned away. She must have something to say, Chizuru thought, something so serious that she needed to tell someone . . . anyone.

"Come inside. I'll make us some coffee."

Chizuru led her into the salon and made her some coffee.

After a sip, Takako suddenly began, "It's about my brother."

Her older brother, Renta, was going to be twenty-five this year.

He had shut himself inside an annex built inside the courtyard a week ago and had refused to come out. He had shut not only the shôji but the shutters, too, behind which there were no signs of activity until sundown. Since the family was well-off and he had been rather sickly since birth, he usually spent all his time studying instead of helping with the family business, so that his parents and their employees were used to his odd habits. But it was a different story when they learned that, for the past week, the maid had brought back all of his meals uneaten. In the kitchen, Takako had observed the maid's dismay over the untouched dishes on the tray.

Five days ago, after the sun had gone down, she and her worried parents had gone to his room in the courtyard, and he had come out from under mountains of books, looking unnaturally pale but not at all gaunt.

"Are you feeling all right?" her father had asked.

And Renta had replied, "There's no need to be concerned. You know I've never had much of an appetite. When I went to Yokohama the other day, I picked up some nutritious foreign foods, and I've been eating that secretly." Since his translation work kept him up late at night, he had been sleeping until late in the day. He also had added that he didn't want to be disturbed and didn't want anyone in his room.

A normal parent might have demanded to see the food he had bought, but neither her parents nor Takako knew anything about foreign things. Takako's brother, who had been admitted to Tokyo Imperial University with top marks seven years ago, would only have said things to confuse them; so his father had told him to finish his meals, and they left it at that.

Things would have been fine if her brother had done nothing, but he had been going out somewhere in the middle of the night. Takako had seen him. Since her brother had started going out at night, she decided to spend every waking moment following him. Since his teens, because he did not have to help at the family business, he had spent his time studying Western history and philosophy. But seven years ago, when he entered university, he had become obsessed with something horrible.

"What was it?" Chizuru was mesmerized.

"Western black magic. The occult. Monsters."

A terrible shock electrified Chizuru's whole body. A new development, which just might be connected with the count's unexpected appearance in Japan.

"My parents work, so we don't have to worry about money. And since my brother has always been sick and is such a bookworm, my parents allowed him to do anything he wanted. He started a correspondence with a bookstore overseas, and old foreign books and strange boxes started to arrive at our house."

When Takako had gone to clean his room, she had found a few items, some of which made the hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

A skull. A shriveled human hand. A bloody sword, human hairs and teeth, animal claws and fangs, bottles containing dead rats and other small creatures, and most terrifying of all—

"A live bat inside a cage. I've seen them before in the woods at Ueno and at the shrine in Asakusa, but never one this ugly. It had a snout like a pig, and small fangs stuck out of its mouth. When it noticed me, it forced its head out from between the bars and made these clicking noises with its fangs. If for some reason the cage had opened, it would have attacked me for sure. I was so afraid that I had to ask my brother about it, and he told me, 'That is a vampire bat from South America. It feeds on animal blood and lives much longer than any ordinary bat. All living things need blood, after all. Anyway, if you ever go into my room again without permission, you're going to get it!' He scolded me terribly."

Chizuru closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Thank you, God. I am grateful.

"And is your brother still studying those horrible things?"

"No, my parents were relieved to see that the shipments of books and strange boxes stopped about a year ago. But then he became obsessed with writing letters, and we started receiving letters from all over the world."

There had been letters from America, England, France, Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Russia, India, and Egypt. Of course she had recognized none of the names of the senders or recipients of her brother's letters.

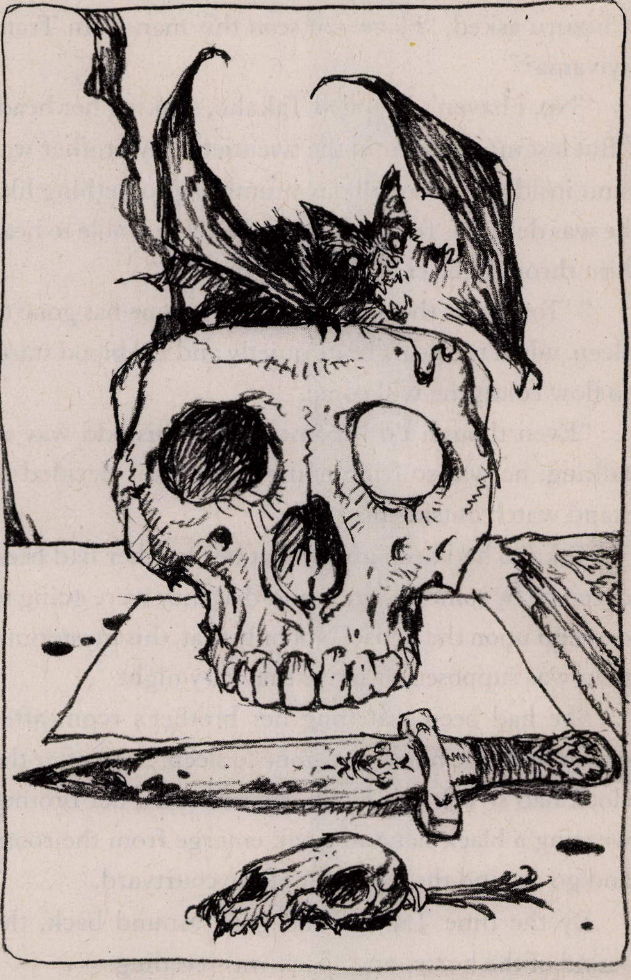
Many of the letters had come from Transylvania, but none of them had the name of the sender, only a wax seal with the letter "D."

Chizuru repeated the initial "D" several times in her mind. *D, D, D . . . D is for Dracula.*

"There were so many letters that my parents suspected he was planning to go to Transylvania. They told me to ask him about it. So, when I did, he smiled at me as if he were seeing me for the first time and answered:

" 'Me, go over there? To a place that has nothing but forests and plains and craggy mountains? A place where the earth is so soaked with blood that not a grain of wheat will grow, where the wells and rivers were poisoned to kill the invading enemies and now not a single fish swims? The people sing curses, and the place has shut out everything, even the sun. No, I needn't go there, Takako. He will come here. He will honor us by coming here. He will brave the treacherous seas and come to this country whose people are vibrant with the hot blood that flows through them. Listen carefully, Takako. He is a magnificent man. No, he may have transcended humanity. You are aware of my condition—that my body, my heart, and liver are tattered and weak like old rags. Dad and Mom have hidden it from you, but I'm expected to live only three more years at most. Don't look so sad. You're the only one who feels sad for me. You've always been a kind girl. But there's no need to worry. I'm not going to die. Even after fifty years or a hundred, I will be alive. More or less as you see me now. I can see you don't believe me. It's no wonder. But it's true. He told me everything. And he will come from the other side of the ocean to give me the safe life he enjoys. Ohh, Transylvania is a most mysterious place! And a prince of that area will grace us with his presence. What a great honor for this country!'

"Ohh, you should have seen his eyes glaring at me. Why did his eyes look so red like burning coals? Why did he lick his lips as he stared at my throat? I'm surprised I didn't faint right then and there." Takako started to tremble just thinking about what had happened.



Resting a reassuring hand on Takako's shoulder, Chizuru asked, "Have you seen this man from Transylvania?"

"No, I haven't," replied Takako, shaking her head. "But last month around the twentieth, my brother was shut inside his room all day mumbling something like he was delirious from fever. Luckily, I was able to hear him through the crack in the door.

" 'Tonight is the night. When everyone has gone to sleep, when the heart beats quietly and the blood starts to flow coldly, he will come.'

"Even though I'd become used to his odd way of talking, he was so frightening then that I decided to stand watch outside his room."

Takako had been afraid that her brother had been deceived by some bad men and that they were going to descend upon the house. Not only that, this mysterious man was supposed to arrive that very night.

She had been watching her brother's room after everyone in the house had gone to sleep. Soon after the clock had struck midnight, she had spied her brother wearing a black hat and cloak emerge from the room and go around the back exit of the courtyard.

By the time Takako had gone around back, the sound of the horses and coach was receding.

"He probably hired the coach and arranged it so the driver would be waiting at that precise time. When I returned to my room, I fell asleep; and when I woke up, the sun had already risen. I went to my brother's room in the courtyard and heard loud snoring from behind the shutters, so I knew that he had come home safely. But I still don't know where he had gone or what he had seen that night."

"Was there any sign of the mysterious man inside your brother's room?"

"Not at all. I knew it was wrong, but I went into his room after he left. But there was no sign of anyone."

So Count Dracula must be hiding somewhere else. Wherever he was, it seemed clear that Takako's brother, Renta, who was free to do anything he wanted with his time, had been doing Count Dracula's bidding.

Considering the family business, he probably had numerous properties and vacant houses available to use as a hideout. It would have been easy for Renta to hide a foreign guest.

It was also clear that Renta had been the one to greet the arrival of this mysterious man and that he had most likely been possessed by him. That Renta moved around only at night was proof of that.

"I'm glad you came, Takako-san," Chizuru said gently to Takako, who looked relieved after telling her story. "Even though Akane wasn't here to see you, I think she would be happy to hear that you came to confide in her. You may have very well saved the lives of everyone in Tokyo—no, maybe everyone in the country. Takako-san, I recently heard from a doctor about a terrible disease, which spread here from Europe. The doctor told me to keep it a secret, but anyone with the disease becomes vulnerable to the sun. So they shut themselves behind closed curtains and shutters and come out only at night and live as they normally would until the sun comes up. They get weaker as time goes on and eventually die. The only treatment is to keep them locked in day and night and to give them lots of garlicky dishes to eat."

Takako turned blue. While she may not have believed just anyone, Takako trusted Akane's older sister, who, though reserved and kindhearted, had always been strong. And here she was telling her about some strange foreign disease.

In that age before e-mail, television news, and international phone calls, when only twenty years had passed since Japan had first established communication with the West, to most people, foreign countries were unfamiliar, frightening places.

"So . . . my brother has the disease?"

"I'm sure of it." Although Chizuru felt sorry to do it, she answered her bluntly. "I'll go to the doctor right away and tell him about your brother. You should go home and wait for him there."

"All right." Takako nodded.

"And one more thing. You'll have to nail shut the windows of your brother's room, rub garlic over the doors, and keep your brother from getting out. If your parents object, tell them that I—no, tell them that Kashiwabara Isanosuke of Renbei-jyuku told you to do it."

Again, Takako nodded. Renbei-jyuku was a name that had some influence in Tokyo. There was no name more likely to convince her parents.

"I'll do exactly as you say," Takako promised, then she left.

Chizuru sent the butler to call for a carriage.

"I'm going to Kôdôkan to see Sensei Kanô."

Then her heart began to beat faster, as if to alert her to the important meeting she was about to have.

3

But Chizuru would end up going elsewhere.

There was someone at the door. The maid, who had gone to answer, came back hastily, and said, "Minister Inoue has sent a carriage for you. He also sent word that everything has been arranged."

Chizuru was stunned. She had indeed received an invitation from Minister Inoue Kaoru for tonight's ball. Although she had declined the invitation because her father was still indisposed, the messenger had stonily replied that they already gotten permission from her father. A carriage would be here at six o'clock to pick her up, her dress and accessories would be at Rokumeikan, and a personal assistant would be there to help her get ready, so she need not worry. He had said it all mechanically and left. And now everything he had told her was becoming reality.

What shall I do?

Chizuru hesitated, but not over going to Rokumeikan. She had been resigned to the fact that she could not refuse to attend. An invitation from Minister Inoue might as well have been a government order. Even Isanosuke could not have refused. There was a more personal reason for her reluctance.

She had heard that only aristocrats and nobility from the financial and political worlds frequented Rokumeikan. Why was she being allowed to go to such a place? Not only that, it was going to be a ball, for which she would be required to wear a Western-style gown and dance, when she had never been dancing in her life.

"Akane," she whispered. If her cheerful little sister had been in her place, she would be sure to acquit herself gracefully.

Where are you?

She felt herself sinking ever deeper into misery and tried to lift her spirits.

Twenty minutes passed, and soon after Chizuru had left in the carriage, an old helper left Renbei-jyuku to deliver Chizuru's letter to Kanô Jigorô. By the early afternoon the next day, however, the messenger's body would be discovered, his throat torn open, at a nearby shrine.

In what is now Hibiya, inside the Yamato Life Insurance building, next to the Imperial Hotel, there once stood the most famous building of the Meiji era.

It was built at Uchiyamashita-chô, Kôjimachi Ward, Tokyo, where the Satsuma clan clothier's mansion had used to be. The property had spread over 8,532 tsubo, and the Renaissance-style building had stood on 467 tsubo.

From its opening on November 28, 1883, to Minister Inoue Kaoru's resignation on September 16, 1887, night after night it had been the site of extravagant parties. Foreign and Japanese nobles and people of distinction in formal attire had danced the night away in the grand ballroom.

The building was called the Rokumeikan.

Although it had been harshly criticized as a symbol of Minister Inoue Kaoru's extreme Europhilia, it had also been an object of fascination to people who longed to know what a sophisticated party in Europe might be like. Commoners could only gaze from afar when the chandeliers lit up the second floor party room and salon, and men in tailcoats and women in evening gowns danced the waltz.

Past the black gate, which had once marked the entrance of the Satsuma clan clothier's property, there was a garden with a pond. Chinese lanterns floated in the water.

The driver got off the coach first to hold open the entrance door.

As soon as she entered, formally attired men and women focused their angry and contemptuous eyes on her.

Even the servants in formal dress did not hide their scornful looks at the arrival of this miserably unsophisticated girl.

After a messenger whispered something in one of the servants' ears, the servant approached Chizuru and said politely, "Minister Inoue told us to expect you. A maidservant is waiting for you upstairs to assist you. Please leave everything to her."

He led her upstairs to the second floor. The halls were overflowing with people.

"Please wait here." The servant disappeared into the crowd.

The elegantly dressed people stared at her openly, while others passed by and ignored her.

Amid the crowd, Chizuru could only tremble.

They don't look right.

This was what she thought of the women. Some of the Japanese women were dressed in European gowns, but they simply could not compare to the wives of the foreign ambassadors and diplomats. Their dresses did not fit right, the skirts of the gowns too long or too short. Why was that woman dragging the bottom of her gown? She should have taken up the hem a little more. Oh, she tripped. And that makeup: why had she put on so much powder? And those red lips! She looks like a dead person. . . .

The image of Akane sick in bed flashed through her mind.

"No," she whispered, and closed her eyes.

Foreigners did not look right in kimonos. That was because the kimono represented the history and tradition of Japan, just as the gown was a reflection of European history and tradition.

If the women who had imitated the European style turned out looking like the dead, perhaps it was just that Europe was a land filled with dead people. Perhaps the people gathered here tonight were all dead.

Japan was still innocent and immature, but maybe it was trying to imitate a culture that was already dead.

No, it must not be. Chizuru shook her head with her eyes still closed.

A hand gently touched her shoulder.

When she opened her eyes and turned around, she found a European man in a military uniform standing before her. The gold epaulets on his shoulders burned into Chizuru's eyes. He looked to be an officer in his mid-thirties.

"Is something the matter, miss?" The man asked in an accented Japanese that was good enough for Chizuru to understand.

His calm and intelligent smile and his magnificent mustache gave her a favorable impression of him.

"It's nothing. Please excuse me."

His smile grew wider.

"You are the first Japanese lady I have met tonight.

You are the only proper lady in this odd and highly incompatible party."

"Oh, no . . ."

"Have a look around." The officer turned a cynical eye toward the people around him. "Your countrymen are stubbornly trying to imitate our ways, but that is not what it means to truly understand a culture. Rather than trying to imitate the look of a culture, if they just opened their hearts to accept things as they are, then they would learn what is admirable about that culture naturally. Go home. This is no place for you," the officer said seriously.

As soon as he had said it, however, the servant from earlier returned and gestured Chizuru toward the far door. Bowing once to the officer, Chizuru headed that way, for some reason feeling sorry to leave him.

The servant led her into what appeared to be a dressing room, and a middle-aged foreign woman helped her to dress.

Chizuru blushed when she had to change out of everything, including her underwear.

The woman's eyes sparkled, as she said, "Beautiful. Very beautiful. Tonight, I have met a true lady." Her Japanese was even better than the officer's.

Wearing a dress for the first time was agonizing for Chizuru. She couldn't breathe in the corset, which made her look even thinner; and the bustle, which was worn to make the skirt look fuller, just seemed strange to her.

Her embarrassment had turned to anger when she saw how low-cut the front of the dress was. Although the woman had pinned a blue artificial rose on her bodice, it could not hide the swell of her breasts.

"This is part of a woman's appeal." Without this maidservant's passionate insistence, Chizuru might have decided not to attend the party. "As for your hair, it will simply have to do. There are women here with a similar style, but you must go now. It's time."

The woman led Chizuru by the hand out of the room.

The orchestra had already started to play inside the ballroom. There were two orchestras, one German and one French, which played alternately.

It was the French orchestra's turn. The song was "The Blue Danube."

A purple curtain with a chrysanthemum crest, and a Chinese flag with a dragon rising upward decorated the wall. Countless chrysanthemums lined the wall underneath.

Many of the dancing women wore gowns and had their hair arranged in a Japanese style, something like Chizuru's.

To the blue-eyed ladies present, it must have been a strange sight.

They politely tried to stifle their laughs and closed their eyes in exasperation, as they saw the Japanese dancers tripping over themselves, unable to dance in time with the music.

Pierre Roti, the French writer who had attended a ball at Rokumeikan, later dismissed it as a "parody."

To Chizuru, however, this was the first time she had laid eyes on such a bizarre scene. She felt as though everything, from the beautiful melody to the gorgeous gowns to the twinkling chandeliers and the dancers as well as the people admiring them, refused to accept her.

As she stood in a daze, someone called out, "Miss Kashiwabara."

Feeling as though she'd been saved, she turned around and saw Minister Inoue standing there.

Hastily, she started to say hello, but he smiled and interrupted, "Good to see you, and looking so very beautiful. Allow me to find you a suitable partner. You have danced before, have you not?"

"No, not once."

When she shook her head, Inoue's expression stiffened.

"What a shock. That a man of Kashiwabara's stature has not property educated his daughter to dance. What a waste of an invitation," he said coldly, like a different person. "Ah, well. Then please entertain our foreign guests. You do speak some English?"

"No . . ."

Chizuru thought this might be the worst day of her life.

Inoue refused to say any more. He briskly turned his back and disappeared into the crowd, but not before Chizuru saw the vein popping out on the side of his forehead.

Oddly, she felt neither humiliation nor anger. She felt rather relieved.

She could now leave this sad imitation of Western society. Her coming here had not helped anyone. It was her only regret, but that couldn't be helped.

Suddenly she felt the tightness of the corset. How could anyone dance wearing that thing?

When she turned around to go back to the dressing room, there was a buzz of activity by the entrance.

The dancing and music stopped.

Every face, including Chizuru's, turned toward the door.

"Ohh!" Inoue's voice rose up from somewhere in the room.

The pale face of a warrior, resting atop a mountainous body, looked down upon the crowd.

The women inexplicably covered their necks, while the men shuddered. The shadow flapping away might have been a bat.

A dog barked in the distance.

"Our guest from Transylvania!" Lord Inoue announced.

The expressions on the faces of the foreign officials changed. They shuddered as if they'd seen something loathsome; their frightened stares pierced the enormous man.

The ballroom, which was an Eastern imitation of the Western world, was about to be interrupted by a different European presence, one of crimson and black.

"I sent him an invitation to this party on the very same day we met. I hope you will all make him feel welcome."

Why had Lord Inoue's voice, the voice of Japan, trembled?

"This is Count Dracula."

Chapter Seven

A FEAST FOR THE UNDEAD

1

October 3, 188–. 9:25 P.M.

Uchiyamashita-chô, Kôjimachi Ward, Tokyo

Even after the host had introduced his guest, the room remained silent.

There was no applause.

And then a British diplomat's wife nearly swooned.

"Oh, the smell, the smell!"

Covering her nose and mouth, she ran out to the veranda.

They had all smelled it: the smell of blood.

But in a moment, the ballroom was just as it had been before, a pleasant room, filled with nothing more than the ordinary aroma of cigarettes, wine, and flowers.

"Music!" someone shouted, and an elegant melody floated over the heads of the crowd.

Then Chizuru witnessed a strange scene.

A few frightened women had begun to creep closer to the count, their faces blank.

They were like beautiful insects drawn mindlessly toward a flame.

Their cheeks were flushed, their eyes glistened.

Don't get closer, Chizuru wanted to yell. *An aristocrat he may be, but he is not human. He drinks the blood of men and women. He is a vampire!*

But she said nothing. Had she raised an alarm, she would have incurred the wrath of Minister Inoue, bringing who knows what harsh punishment on Renbei-jyuku. And, in any case, who would have believed her?

A young blond man, who seemed to be the escort of one of the women surrounding the count, stepped forward. He cast a hard glance at a redhead, a girl of no more than twenty-two or -three, and said to the count, in German, "I am Lieutenant Helmut Lundich, an officer with the Germany embassy. I came here with this lady, but it appears she is quite taken with you. That is fine. However, I have several questions about where you are from. Will you answer me?"

Like most of the Japanese present, Chizuru did not know a word of German.

But a man, perhaps Inoue's secretary, quickly translated for the minister's sake.

"If they are questions I am able to answer," the count replied in German.

The officer was dumbfounded. There was no weakness in this man standing before him.

Then he nodded nastily. His face was red, and he appeared to be drunk.

"I have done some reading about Eastern European history, especially concerning certain events that took place in Transylvania and Wallachia. Your country certainly has a bloody history. That war with the Turkish Ottoman Empire was a fierce one, which must have left your land drenched in blood."

Inoue and the foreigners all drew a breath. It was clear the officer was spoiling for a fight.

"You have a grievance against my country?" the count asked.

A hush fell over the crowd; silence pervaded the room.

After a moment's hesitation, the officer shot back, "Not at all. As a German military man, I wouldn't dream of offending you. In fact, I respect all warriors greatly, especially the ruler of Wallachia, Vlad Ţepeş."

"Ah." The count smirked. This was no peace offering. The air froze again.

Although the crowd had noticed the count's unnaturally red lips, they had not noticed the fangs—no, the fanglike canine teeth protruding from his mouth—until now.

The count said in a tired voice, "That name will be remembered fondly by the Transylvanian and Wallachian people for all time. He was the hero who stood his ground against the Ottoman invaders."

"But that's not all." The officer grinned. Jabbing his finger at the count's chest, he added, "You didn't mention he was also a tyrant who impaled tens of thousands of Turkish soldiers on stakes, leaving them to die in agony. But then again, such a fanatic is surely a suitable ruler for a country with such a bloody history. Some say he drank the blood of the soldiers that dripped down the stakes. Why, even after they died . . ."

The officer could speak no further.

The count was gazing into his eyes.

It was as if all the drunkenness and bluster had been drained from his body, leaving only terror.

"Count."

As Inoue moved to intervene, the man from Transylvania ordered the officer, "Get out."

The officer began to back away slowly, as if threatened by a force only he could see.

After retreating a few feet, he stopped suddenly and ran out the door. There were screams as he bumped into several people, who staggered out of his way.

Chizuru heard his footsteps down the hall and down the stairs, then nothing.

"My sincere apologies for the trouble. A spirited young man, but it seems he recalled some urgent matter demanding his attention."

He bowed. The women were wholly enchanted by his words, the rest merely forced smiles. Not at all troubled by the attention, the count looked around and said, "This is a special occasion. I would like to dance with the beautiful women of this country."

Still looking at the place so recently occupied by the officer, Chizuru finally turned around toward the count.

Everyone was staring at her.

Before she could realize why, the enormous black figure had come forward and, in a dark voice that seemed to rain down from above, said, "May I have this dance?"

She gasped. Without taking off his cape, the count took her shoulders in his arms and led her toward the dance floor.

It was not by force but rather by a fierce and vibrant energy that seemed to emanate from deep within the man that she was pushed so smoothly and irresistibly toward the dance floor.

"Now."

He took her hand. It was softer and colder than Chizuru had expected.

"Please," she said, looking up at his face. "I know who you are. Before you've slaked your thirst for blood, you will be slain by our brave warriors."

At this, surprisingly, the count smiled. He looked at her longingly, and a little mockingly, like a father who has realized his little girl has become a woman.

"Brave warriors. That is what they called me a long time ago."

His smile faded but did not disappear entirely.

"Even as I hold you in my arms, you are willing to betray my identity. The women of your country are quite brave, I see. But this is a battle for another time. Now, let us dance."

"This is the first time I've ever danced."

Though his face betrayed surprise, he said quickly, "When I step back, you step forward. When I step forward, you step back. Soon you will find your body moving naturally with the music."

"But—"

The count interrupted her. "Do not worry. Beautiful movements are easily mastered. The human body was made for such beauty."

Chizuru looked up at the black figure, astonished.

Could these really be the words of a devil?

The count narrowed his eyes.

"Now, your hairstyle. It was good enough for our first meeting, but it is simply not suitable for this occasion."

Without waiting for her response, he scanned the room and stopped at a nearby table, where there was an arrangement of brightly colored roses in a vase.

After picking one out, the count returned to Chizuru and set his hand on her hair.

Chizuru felt his fingers touch the string. In a moment, her long tresses came tumbling down. Her hair was quickly gathered up, and something was tied around it at the hairline. Chizuru's hair fell down to her hips without a single strand out of place.

Chizuru understood right away. The count had cut the string, put up her hair in a different arrangement, and tied her hair together with the stem of the rose.

"Try to relax," said the count.

"Yes," she answered without thinking.

She knew what she had to do. She waited for the rhythm of the waltz to take them.

It came.

The two gave themselves over to the music.

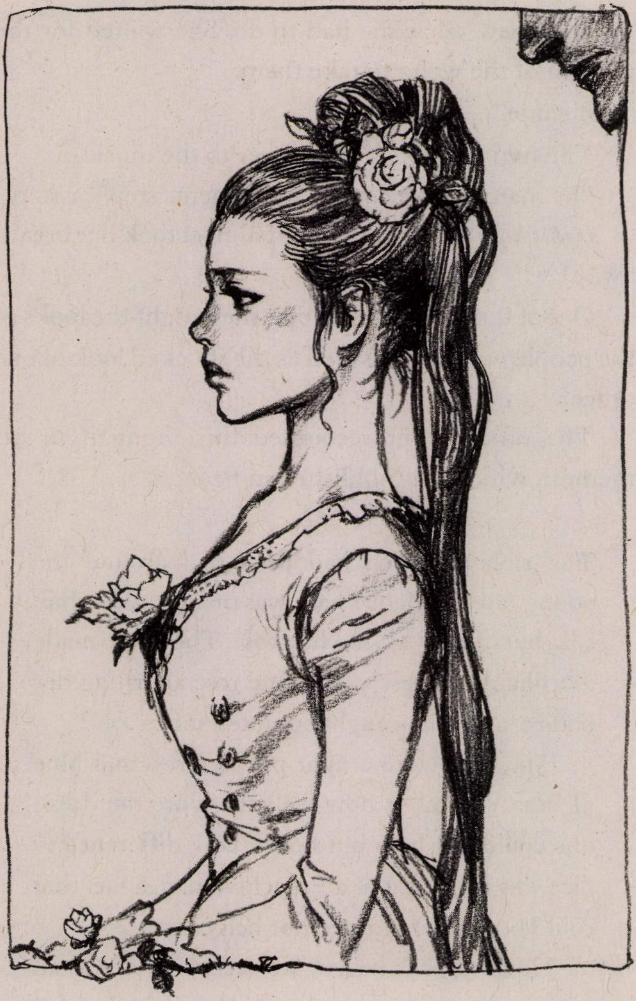
She matched the count's movements step for step.

Is this how the devil moves? It almost took her breath away.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the looks of the people watching, as well as the shocked look of one officer.

The officer later recounted this moment in his memoir, which was published in France:

> The ribbon, which had been tied around the young Japanese lady's hair, was made not of white silk, but of an elegant white rose. The white made a brilliant contrast to the blue rose adorning her bodice, and both caught our attention.
>
> The lady wore a light purple dress and blue gloves. No matter how well she wore the dress, one could not help but notice how different her face was from that of a Frenchwoman, a fact that could be neither ignored nor helped.
>
> However, her beauty was certainly not at all out of place, from the glossy black hair that fell



down to her hips to the angelic eyes like those of an adorable kitten. On that night, the East surpassed the West.

Though she was a bit stiff at first, at last she waltzed so smoothly we all forgot that it was her first time dancing.

By the end of the first stanza, everyone noticed that her legs had turned to gold. As the music played on, the buzz of the guests had turned into one of admiration and was eventually silenced by the two figures.

I was probably not the only one who noticed that the other couples on the floor had begun to disappear one by one. They had become embarrassed to dance to the same music and in the same room with this elegant couple.

However, neither those who had withdrawn nor those who watched betrayed any sign of scorn or defeat.

They had simply been captivated by the God-given grace of the two dancers.

When the music ended, thunderous applause greeted them. I admired the Japanese women, who had shown only contempt when the young lady had first arrived, who then apologized for their lack of dignity and freely lavished praise upon the way she had danced.

After gracefully acknowledging the error of their ways, they apologized. This graciousness was one of the greatest virtues of this island country that I have come to know in my short time here.

—Pierre Roti, "An Autumn Dance in Japan"

2

After the praise had abated, Inoue Kaoru said sullenly, "Please forgive those fools who treated you so rudely."

He apologized to Chizuru with a pained expression on his face.

"I have never heard such applause and praise bestowed on a Japanese dancer. Not since this Rokumeikan opened its doors . . . I have saved face. I am grateful."

He took Chizuru's hand in his, squeezed it, then walked away, still sulking.

"Follow me to the veranda," the count said.

"I will not," Chizuru answered.

"Why not?"

"Are the people of your country always so difficult?"

He looked angrily at her for a second, then quickly smiled.

"Hm . . . so. The men in this country treat women politely, it seems. The times have changed."

"For the better."

The count laughed out loud.

"You're very blunt. Indeed, I had heard quite the opposite—that Japanese women quietly support their men, but you, on the other hand, are quite bold. Very well. Will you accompany me to the veranda?"

"Gladly."

She didn't know why she had answered this way. He was a diabolical man from a dreadful land. Even so, she was not afraid. Far from it: his smile, and the way he looked at her, his overall air . . . he was like a father with whom she could feel safe and to whom she could give herself over.

When they stepped out onto the veranda, the two were lit in a blue and red glow.

A thunderous sound followed.

Fireworks shot up from nowhere, resembling an upside-down meteor with a tail; they then bloomed into a colorful flower and faded into the darkness.

"It's chilly," Chizuru said.

Everything—from the chill in the air to the scent of flowers, wine, and cigarettes to the melancholy music of the orchestra—hinted at the coming of autumn.

"The creatures of autumn," muttered the count.

"What?"

"A legend in my country," the count said, looking at up at the fireworks. His face lit up, then was quickly shrouded again in darkness. "Somewhere in this world, there is a land whose creatures live forever in the season of autumn. A land shut in by thick fog, freezing rain, darkness, and fallen leaves. Wolves roam the earth, and bats fly the air. The earth is dead, the forest withered, and the water is mixed with sulfur. That is where the autumn creatures dwell. Their hearts do not beat, even though they breathe, and their breath is cold as ice. They do not live or die, eat or sleep. They wonder what spring, summer, and winter are like. That is all. But they may be fortunate. They do not feel joy, or sadness or anger; nor do they feel hunger.

"Does that make them fortunate?"

"More fortunate than some."

Chizuru gasped. She sensed an awful loneliness behind the count's words. She felt as if she had learned something of what this demon had had to endure.

Perhaps this man has had to suffer terribly . . . over his fate as a vampire.

She wanted to console him. But she suppressed those feelings. There was something she needed to ask first.

"Count Dracula, you drank my sister Akane's blood. Where is my sister now?"

For a moment, the count looked shocked but then quickly regained his composure. "Oh, so you know. Then this will be quick."

"My sister said she met you at the mansion in Kôjimachi Ward. That must be when you set your sights on her."

"I'm sorry, but you are mistaken. I did not drink your sister's blood."

"What?"

She was about to call him a liar when a woman's scream came from behind the count. A scream of pure terror.

The count turned around. A middle-aged Japanese woman, paralyzed with shock and fear, was pointing a trembling finger at the count.

"He doesn't have a shadow!"

A passing couple nearby looked at the count, then at his feet.

Chizuru also looked.

The shadows pooled around the count's feet were the shadows of the middle-aged woman and the other people around her.

"I dropped my handkerchief. When I picked it up, I noticed he has no shadow!"

The crowd's eyes swirled with terror. But no one tried to catch him or pointed a weapon in his direction. No one knew how to react. No more could be expected; this is how people react when faced with the incomprehensible.

"So it's over. We should move along," said the count.

He grabbed Chizuru by the hips, giving her no opportunity to resist. His fist penetrated the corset and smashed into her side, and Chizuru fell unconscious.

Taking her in both arms, the count ran like a shadow toward the railing.

The moment his body floated in the air, some of the onlookers began to scream.

The black cape flapped like the wings of a bird, and the count landed soundlessly on the ground below.

He ran to a coach hitched to four horses, and after laying Chizuru on a seat inside, jumped into the driver's seat.

"What do you think you're doing?" The driver tried to resist, but the count grabbed him by the throat and threw him to the ground.

He cracked the whip over the horses, and the coach started to roll.

Only after the horses had passed the main gate and receded into the distance did someone cry out, "Call for the police!"

Around the same time, Minazuki Daigo had returned to the row houses.

He had hit all the brokerage houses near Count Dracula's mansion and searched all the vacant properties, but had nothing to show for his efforts.

After having parted ways with them thirty minutes ago, Daigo now headed home, while Jigorô and Shirô walked in the direction of Rokumeikan.

"It is an invitation from Lord Inoue," Jigorô had said, a bit wearily.

After they had walked to the jinricksha stand, Jigorô paid both fares, and they parted ways.

Daigo's body felt feverish and as heavy as lead.

Without a doubt, it was the tuberculosis.

As he descended the stone steps, which led to the wooden doors of the row houses, he was met with some odd but familiar faces.

"Hey there," one of the four men called out. It was

Tatsu. He was one of the men who had tried to collect a man's debt by taking his daughter as payment. It was Shirô and Daigo who had had stopped them.

Daigo smiled back.

That Tatsu had simply admitted defeat back then was refreshing, and Daigo did not have a bad impression of him.

"Just so you know. We didn't go to your house. That's not why we came. And the matter of the girl and the debt was given to someone else to handle. Thanks to you and that judo kid, we were fired."

"That's—"

"Don't get me wrong. None of us are blaming you. To be honest, we're relieved to get out of that line of work. Right?"

The other three nodded at once. The two men, excluding the biggest one, looked embarrassed because they had used a knife against an unarmed Shirô.

"Anyway, it must be fate that brought us together again. We're just about to go out for a drink. Why don't you come with us?"

Normally Daigo would have refused, but perhaps he had been depressed by his mother's death and his own illness.

He agreed, and they went to a local watering hole.

"Hey, there's Mokichi and his gang."

Just ahead was a group of young yakuza sitting around a table. They lowered their heads.

The sake and food arrived. After a while, Tatsu pointed to the biggest yakuza and said, "Me and him are from samurai families. One thing led to another, and we're yakuza now, but maybe we just didn't persevere enough. That why I was happy to see you that day. To see a samurai who hadn't lost the soul of a samurai. And still so young."

Daigo smiled. These yakuza would never know the sorrow deep inside his heart.

"Hey, why are you so sad? Get ahold of yourself and drink up. I'll take you to a place with some pretty women next."

Mere moments later, there were bottles of sake, and Daigo's cheeks had turned bright red.

A woman who brought a new bottle of sake to their table said, "Well, for someone so young, he can certainly hold his liquor. And he's so adorable I could just eat him up."

After discussion on a number of unrelated subjects, Tatsu said, "From time to time, we are hired by brokerage houses to get rid of squatters who refuse to pay rent on certain properties. We just heard about something strange happening with one of the brokers we used to work for." Tatsu began again, "The son seems to have been possessed. He locks himself in his room during the day and only comes out at night. Something about how he's full of energy even though he hardly eats and goes out somewhere every night—Hey!?"

Daigo stood up suddenly with a stern look on his face.

"Tell me the address of this brokerage house. Right now."

He demanded this in a voice and with a regard so fierce it was possible to have mistaken Daigo for a demon.

3

October 3, 188–, 11:15 P.M.
Akasaka Shinmachi Ni-chôme, Akasaka Ward, Tokyo.

A large sign in front of the building read BROKERAGE HOUSE NIIZUKA. Five shadows stood in front of it: Daigo and the four yakuza. The moon was brilliant, and the night was windy. The men's side-locks blew in the wind.

Daigo was so excited that Tatsu asked what was going on.

He had no choice but to tell them everything, although he did not expect them to believe him. When Tatsu asked if he was going in there right now, Daigo answered in the affirmative.

"It's probably safer to go during the day," Tatsu said.

"A woman has been captured. She might be turned into a vampire tonight."

"Then I'll show you the way," Tatsu assured him. The other three followed.

"The son has a separate room in the courtyard. Let's go around back."

The five men moved to the fence on the west side of the property.

"Hey, Gen."

On Tatsu's cue, one of the yakuza fell on all fours against the fence; then Yasuke, another one of the yakuza, stepped on his back and jumped easily on top of the fence. He pulled the rest of them up; and in barely two minutes, they were over the fence and in the yard.

"You sure are used to doing that," Daigo said, amazed.

Tatsu scratched his head and replied, "Oh, cut me a little slack."

Because the moon was so bright, the yard and the annex about seventy feet north of the main house were in plain view.

"Kind of chilly out here." Gen shivered.

The others nodded. There was something eerie about the courtyard. They felt as though they were in the presence of something unnatural.

Daigo stopped and bowed to the men.

"This is far enough. Please turn back now."

"Don't be polite with us." Tatsu stared Daigo down. "You didn't tell us to come here. We came here on our own. We're ready for anything. Besides, you're trying to rescue someone, right? Why don't you let us yakuza do some good for a change?"

"You'd be risking your lives."

The biggest yakuza slapped Daigo's shoulder and said, "We should've died in the war against the Satsuma and Chôshu clans during the *go-isshin.* This might be a good place for us to die."

Daigo looked at all four of the men.

"That's how my father died."

For a while, they didn't move. Then they nodded solemnly. As the moonlight cast a clear shadow on the ground, the wind turned their faces cold. Tatsu rested a firm hand on Daigo's shoulder and gave him a quick shake.

"Let's go."

"Right."

Daigo unwrapped a sword from a cloth and put it inside his jacket.

When they approached the door, Tatsu said, "Gen and Yasuke, you go in from the back. As soon as you hear us go in, you two come in after us. Supposedly he can turn himself into a bat or a wolf. Don't let down your guard."

"Leave it to us." Two blades glimmered in the moonlight. The two men took off around the back.

Though it was an annex, the building was still rather large. Daigo guessed it was about fifty *jyô*.

"You think he's here? I didn't see a carriage outside," the biggest yakuza said.

"At the very least, she could be here."

"All right, then let's go." The enormous man quickly jammed a knife between the shutter doors.

The right door came loose easily. When he removed it from its hinges with both hands, something struck the door.

He let out a low groan and staggered.

"Bastard!" Tatsu shouted.

Halting Tatsu in his tracks, Daigo ran out to help the big man himself.

The biggest yakuza fell to his knees, still holding the door in his arms. Something whizzed through the air.

Daigo's right arm made an arc. When had he drawn his sword? He had deflected something with it. Two black iron arrows were stuck in the wall on either side of him.

Going inside, Daigo eyed the device set in front of the entrance.

Several bows were placed sideways, one on top of the other, with the arrows cocked in the bowstrings. There were wires attached to the bowstrings that ran down beneath the stand and to the shutters. When any of the wires were snapped or shifted position, a bowstring was released and let loose an arrow.

When had Renta made this?

Whether he had had the knowledge from the start, or had learned how to build the contraption from one of his bizarre imported books, it was clear the broker's son was no ordinary man.

Daigo was preoccupied with the killing machine for only a few seconds; then he turned quickly toward Tatsu and the biggest yakuza.

Tatsu had just raised the man in his arms. The shutter had been moved out of the way. The iron arrow had gone through the door and stuck in the right side of the man's chest.

"It got his lungs. We can't move him."

Daigo nodded. "Tatsu-san, please get a doctor. I'm sorry, but I have to keep going."

"Yeah, but . . ."

Tatsu looked distraught. Calling a doctor would cause a commotion. Maybe Daigo was planning to settle the matter before that happened, but Tatsu wondered if he would be able to confront the enemy who had created such a deadly device on his own.

"But you can't take him on by yourself."

"I'll be all right. Gen-san and Yasuke-san will—"

Daigo looked behind him.

He had heard a terrible scream.

"I'm all right. Tatsu. Go," said the injured man in a surprisingly strong voice.

"You mustn't go," Daigo warned Tatsu desperately.

But Tatsu said, "Okay. Just wait for me." He gently laid the man on the ground.

"Tatsu-san, no."

Daigo tried to stop him, but Tatsu shook his head. "The doctor won't get here in time to help him. Try to think of his feelings. If he was able to help you, this is a good way to die."

Heat welled up from inside him, and Daigo closed his eyes.

"I won't forget. I am truly grateful."

Patting Daigo on the shoulder, Tatsu gestured for them to go.

"Wait a minute."

Daigo went outside and leaned the shutter door against the side of the building.

His blade drew a crisscross in the air and the shutter fell into four square pieces on the ground.

Putting two pieces together, he handed a set to Tatsu.

"It may not be much, but it's better than nothing."

"A makeshift shield. Not bad. Hey, I'm taking your obi."

Taking the obi from the injured man's kimono, he wrapped it around the wooden pieces and held the shield from the makeshift strap. Then he nodded to Daigo.

Daigo went into the hall first.

"Gen-san, are you all right?" Daigo shouted.

"Hey!"

"It's okay. If somebody is here, we've already been found out."

They could hear Gen's voice up ahead. "A weird bow and arrow got Yasuke. He's dead."

Daigo closed his eyes.

"Don't blame yourself," said Tatsu. Then he shouted out, "Gen, when you come this way, watch out!"

Daigo took a deep breath and took out the candle and matches he had bought last night at the bar. He lit the candle. He had brought it in anticipation of a night battle.

Putting a hand on the door, he slid it open. A familiar smell assaulted his nose.

"What the hell—" yelled Tatsu.

If Chizuru had been there, she wouldn't have believed her eyes.

Not a single book, not one vial full of strange chemicals, no bats flapping about in the room.

The dim candlelight illuminated only a group of people sitting in a circle in the center of the desolate room.

Despite being exposed by the light, no one bothered to turn around. They did not even move an inch.

"There's . . . Niizuka and his wife and Shuzo the head clerk and Hachisuke the accountant. What the hell are they doing here?"

Tatsu's voice had gone past terror and turned to hatred of the people whose actions he could not comprehend.

Without a word, Daigo approached the man who appeared to be the owner and brought the candle closer to his neck.

Nothing on the right side.

But on the left, just above the artery, were two jagged puncture wounds.

"Is this . . . ?" Tatsu's voice quivered.

"It's the vampire's kiss," Daigo answered. It was a term he had heard from Jigorô only that afternoon.

"So everyone from Niizuka's office . . . they're all . . . ?"

Daigo lowered the candle and shone the light on Niizuka's lips. The two canine teeth, as sharp as animal fangs, peered out from between his thick red lips.

"They've been taken. Niizuka is dead," Daigo answered, relieved to see that Takako was not there. That kindhearted girl with the plump little face need have no part in this.

"What will we do?"

"We have no choice."

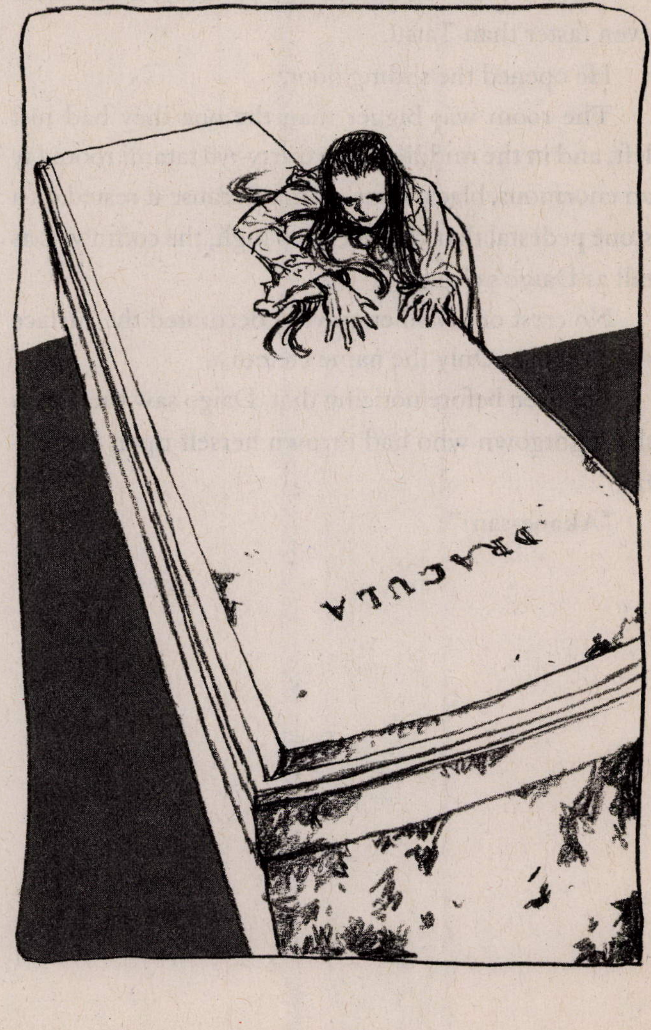
"Got it." Tatsu had already drawn his knife.

"Are you still there? Come here!" It was Gen's terrified voice coming from the other side of the far sliding door.

And leave these people behind?

Daigo hesitated.

"There's a coffin . . . and a girl!"


DRACULA

Gen's words brought Daigo running to the door even faster than Tatsu.

He opened the sliding door.

The room was bigger than the one they had just left, and in the middle of the thirty-*jyô* tatami room lay an enormous, black stone coffin. Because it rested on a stone pedestal that was itself hip high, the coffin was as tall as Daigo's chest.

No crest or lavish engraving decorated the surface of the coffin. Only the name DRACULA.

But even before noticing that, Daigo saw the girl in the nightgown who had thrown herself upon the coffin.

"Akane-san!"

Chapter Eight

THE CRAZED DEVIL

1

Before Daigo could reach her, Gen was already at Akane's side.

Her body twitched. Her white fingers were wrapped around his tanned wrist.

Akane's hand reached out toward them, though she still leaned against the coffin.

"Ohhh!" Gen threw back his head in pain, unable to remove the slender hand that gripped him. She had a brute strength that could crush bone.

"Gen!" Tatsu ran and grabbed Akane's hand.

"Whoa!?" Tatsu cried out and quickly let go. "Her hand—it's like a python!"

That's how strong her grip was.

Akane turned toward them.

Against her face, which was sapped of all color, her lips looked unnaturally red. And her wide-open eyes also burned red.

Tatsu instinctively turned away.

Daigo also moved sideways to avoid her gaze.

Daigo's arm came out of his jacket and swung downward at Akane's head.

"Gyyaaaah!"

Had there ever been a scream so terrible? Letting go of Gen's hand, Akane grabbed the small chain that had been put around her neck.

Another horrible scream.

White smoke plumed out of her clenched fist. Even as she turned up the whites of her eyes, she tried desperately to take off the thing grasped in her hand . . .

A gold crucifix.

Daigo stooped to lift her unconscious body in his arms and stared at the stone coffin.

So this was where the root of the evil rested. As long as this remained here, Dracula could continue to satisfy his thirst for blood, using this coffin as his resting place.

"I'm sorry," Daigo said to Akane, then put his hands on the lid of the coffin. "Help me, please."

Tatsu came to his aid, and the two pushed with all their might.

The lid made a grinding noise as it slid slowly toward the foot of the coffin.

"It's moving! Push!"

"Right."

The sound of grinding stone echoed until the coffin had opened halfway.

Daigo peered in and saw that the bottom of the coffin was covered with ocher-colored soil.

It was the soil of Transylvania. Vampires had to rest every day in their own graves, but could travel far from them by lining a coffin with their native soil; this stratagem permitted them to spread their disease all over the world. They had to send Dracula back to his grave—for eternity, this time. But with what weapon?

Daigo's hand reached inside his jacket.

"A crucifix?"

"No, I have no more."

"That is good," said a voice from above.

There was a crushing sound of wood and boards being broken apart, as a black figure descended and landed before the two men.

He was wearing an Inverness cape and a driver's cap. He was still young. Heavy books, glass bottles, and test tubes came crashing down around his feet.

"My name is Renta, and I am the count's servant!" The son of the broker roared like an animal.

Had he never known Dracula, he would have continued to waste away his days as nothing more than an eccentric with some peculiar hobbies. But his infatuation with evil had gone too far.

Red rays seemed to shoot out of his eyes, and his white canine teeth, which stuck out of his crimson lips, made him the very image of a vampire.

"So that the count could live down here, I've made the attic my home. You have interrupted my experiments in an exceedingly rude fashion. Don't think you'll get out alive."

"Come and get me, you monster. Sacrificing your family to a beast . . . Have you no shame?" cried Tatsu.

Renta furrowed his brows and quickly smiled.

"You think the count drank my family's blood? You idiot. The esteemed count would never drink from such lowly people as my mother and father and the clerk. They were my own prey."

Tatsu rolled his eyes. The yakuza and former samurai could not believe his ears. "You . . . drank your family's blood? You really are the devil!"

Renta laughed, the fangs sticking out of the sides of his mouth.

"By the looks of you, you must be a yakuza. A lowlife like you is simply not capable of understanding how *honorable* it is to serve the count. My stupid parents, who were once no better than insects, have now become noble beings, blessed with eternal life."

"Shut up!" Tatsu ran toward him, raising a knife over his head.

The blade came at Renta at great speed and with violent power behind it, but he evaded it easily. A vampire's reflexes are far superior to those of ordinary humans.

"You bastard!" Tatsu swung the knife sideways this time, but Renta crouched forward and eluded the attack, sending Tatsu spinning around helplessly.

Renta attacked him from behind.

"No!" Daigo moved. Tatsu's body dropped.

"Gyyaah!"

It was Renta who had screamed. Tatsu had escaped his clutches, and blood spurted out of Renta's side.

After missing the first time, Tatsu had stooped and continued to spin around, slashing Renta in the side with his knife. Perhaps the former samurai had not forgotten all his fighting techniques.

"Oh, so you do feel pain. Don't worry. I'll put you out of your misery."

Glaring at the bloody knife, Tatsu approached Renta, giving every appearance of being confident of victory.

Then Renta stood up straight. He was holding something in his right hand, which was pressed closely against his side. It let out a roar and a lightning flash.

Tatsu hunched forward and then was sent hurtling backward. He fell over on his back about ten feet away. A pool of blood spread from beneath him.

"Tatsu!"

Another shot.

Gen fell over, grabbing his chest. Daigo quickly hid behind the coffin.

The weapon in Renta's hand was a foreign-made revolver.

Renta twirled it around. He parted his red lips and smiled.

"Do you know what this is, you old-fashioned swordsman? This is an American-made pistol—the Colt Lightning. Better than the Japanese matchlock, which can make only one shot at a time. This shoots every time I pull the trigger, as many as six times in a row! Now, come on out. I have four bullets left, and I'll shoot every single one into your body."

Daigo had heard about the repeating gun. Though he had thought he had been able picture it in his mind, it turned out he had no idea what the gun could really do. Seeing it for the first time, he could do no more than acknowledge its lethal power. Renta must have bought it from some shady foreigner in Yokohama.

"During the war of the *go-isshin,* you swordsmen fell, one after the next, before the muzzle of the gun. That's when the age of the sword truly ended. Do you mean to repeat history here, you fools? Look at this."

Passing the gun into his left hand, he used his right hand to peel back the Inverness and black shirt.

Only a faint red line remained on his side where Tatsu had cut him.

Renta threw his head back and laughed.

"Nothing but a stake through the heart can destroy us. There's no sense in your resisting us. Now show yourself and surrender."

A third shot rang out. It missed the coffin by seven feet and went through the shutter.

He can't aim as well with his left hand.

As soon as he realized this, Daigo ran out in a crouch.

"What—?"

Renta pulled the trigger twice in quick succession.

The first shot grazed Daigo's shoulder; the second disappeared into nothingness.

Just when the hammer was cocked and Renta was about to fire another shot, a white flash streaked before Renta's eyes.

There was a terrible sound.

Daigo's sword had cut off Renta's right hand, which had gone up instinctively, then it cut off Renta's arm at the shoulder.

"Gwwahhh!"

Daigo moved to deliver the final blow to the vampire, who was now throwing his head back in pain. As he advanced, he heard Renta scream someone's name.

When he heard the name, Daigo stopped the trajectory of the blade from colliding with the shadow that now descended.

"Takako-san!?"

It was indeed Takako who stood between Renta and Daigo. But could this really be the same heavyset young girl he had known? Only her belly and thighs gave any sign of her former plumpness; her face and upper body were shriveled, as if her insides had been sucked out of her.

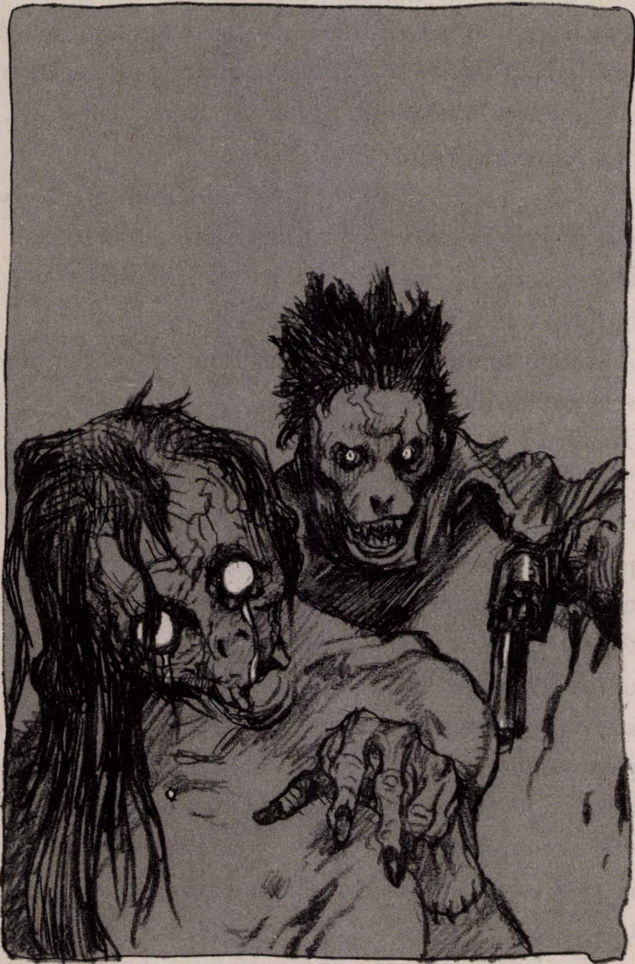
Her eyes bulged like those of a goldfish, while only two teeth peered out of her half-opened mouth. The rest had been pulled out. The nails on her hands and feet were also gone. They had been peeled off. And why was her mouth split from ear to ear? It had been torn apart. Why did she stagger when she moved? The lengths of her arms and legs were uneven. Why? Just look at the seams where the joints come together at the knees. The joints had been severed, cut down, and connected again.

"I'm . . . so . . . glad . . . ," she said sounding very much like Takako. "You came . . . to . . . see me. . . . Daigo-sama . . . you . . . must have . . . known my . . . feelings . . . for you. . . ."

Daigo could not move. This thing in front of him was unmistakably Takako. No, it had *once* been Takako.

"Can you kill her? Can you kill this girl?" Renta stood behind her, holding his left shoulder and showing his fangs. "People say she's my sister. But she is nothing but a traitor. She was suspicious of me from the start. And today, she went to your dojo, probably to tell you about me. But I had my eye on her, knowing that she would betray me one day. That's why I pretended to go out at night. And I tailed her. She's my creation now. She is a new person. Her body and blood will be completely new by the end of the night. But she needs fresh blood for that. Feed on him, my dear sister."

A white wrinkled arm reached out and wrapped around Daigo's neck.



"Hear my wishes . . . Daigo-sama. . . . Let me kiss you . . . please."

Her bloody eyes blazing, she drew her withered face closer and pressed her lips against Daigo's neck.

Her body quivered.

"Daigo . . . sama . . ."

The sword had penetrated her heart and through her back.

"I'm . . . so . . . glad . . ."

Drawing the blade back, Daigo saw Takako crumple to the floor.

Renta stood on the other side of her with the muzzle of the gun pointed at him. Barely ten feet separated them.

"Only one shot left, but I won't miss from this distance."

"Shoot me in the heart or the head. Otherwise, you will die," Daigo said calmly, trying to hide the hatred, a hatred of a force he had never felt before. Renta could not be allowed to live. This man, who had invited a foreign devil to his native land and then tried to change that land into an unspeakable hell.

Renta grinned. "Even if I shoot you someplace else, you will still die."

The gun pointed down. Daigo was stricken with shock. With the sound of the gunshot, heat ripped through his left thigh, and he fell to one knee.

"Now you can't move. I'd drink your blood myself, but you're still dangerous. Let the others have you first." Renta jerked his chin behind him.

Something or some things began to stir in the other room.

The sound of them creeping over the tatami floor drew closer and closer.

Finally, they materialized as four shadows and surrounded Daigo.

"Let me introduce you to my family. My father, Shôsuke; mother, Tsukiyo; the head clerk, Shuzo; and the accountant, Hachisuke. Hey, this gentleman will help you satisfy your thirst. Welcome him."

The shadows lowered their heads.

They had all probably had an ordinary working day at the brokerage house only yesterday.

"Let me drink," they all said at once.

2

Daigo was prepared for what he had to do. Takako had said that she was glad when he had stabbed her. In death, her face had finally seemed at peace.

To the living dead, true death was salvation.

"Get him!" At Renta's cry, the four shadows attacked.

For Daigo, who had been shot in the leg, there was no escape. Nevertheless, a white light made a beautiful arc at their feet.

Renta watched in horror as all four rolled over on the floor.

Their legs had been severed at the shins. Such was the precision of Daigo's sword, thanks to his training in the Hôki school of swordsmanship. He had cut down the legs of four people—eight legs in all—with one precise swing of the sword.

Daigo rose to his feet, leaning against his sword. He rushed forward, dragging his left leg. But it was too late.

Renta was already in front of him, aiming the muzzle of the Colt at him.

"You're very skilled. You've even made me see the art of the sword in a new way," he said grimly. "But your demonstration merely gave me the time to reload my gun. Soon enough, they will forget this pain. Until then, don't move. You won't live much longer anyway, but you might as well prolong the inevitable for as long as you can."

Daigo took a bold step forward. He could not passively allow his blood to be spilled; his samurai pride would not allow it. Even if he was shot dead, he would get off one last attack.

"Idiot."

The hammer on the Colt was cocked.

In that single split second, which would decide his fate, the shutter doors made a thunderous noise as they came crashing down.

The blue glow of moonlight flooded the room.

Bathed in the glow was a black shadow, who carried in his arms another black shadow, dressed in a ball gown.

"Count Dracula!?"

"Chizuru-san!?"

Daigo could not understand why Dracula was holding Chizuru captive. Glaring at him, Daigo saw a terribly human smile come over the vampire's face.

"So you have found this place at last. I can't say that I am happy to see you here," he said sentimentally. Noticing Daigo's eyes fixed on Chizuru, he said, "Don't worry. This young lady is still a lady. She looks like a woman I once used to know, you see."

Daigo furrowed his brows. He sensed an undeniable loneliness in the count's voice. Perhaps even this devil has had the experience of loving someone.

"At the same time, it is precisely for that reason I can barely restrain my desire to drink her blood."

"Count Dracula," Renta called out, bowing deferentially. "I will prepare your meal at once. But first I will kill this fool. Better yet, I will allow my family to feast on his blood."

Without notice, the Niizuka people were kneeling at the count's feet and bowing their heads to the ground.

"It was a mistake," the count said, still holding Chizuru.

"What?" Renta furrowed his brows.

"It was a mistake to turn you into a night creature. This was all forbidden. In order for me to live in this country, you were not to make my existence public. There are scholars in every country. But once my existence is widely known, the entire country will turn against me. And even with my dark powers that would be troublesome. You have thoughtlessly disclosed this sworn secret. This looks like your own family. How many of them have you poisoned?"

"Begging your pardon, Count Dracula," Renta began to protest, "I thought it would be to our advantage to increase our numbers even by a few. It would be easy to live in seclusion in this tiny country, but if you intend to conquer it, we require strength in numbers. I had thought to—"

Suddenly Chizuru came raining down. Instinctively sticking his blade in the tatami floor, Daigo caught her in his arms. A violent pain ran down his left leg, as he now supported the weight of two people. Even as he staggered, he heard Renta shriek.

Setting down Chizuru, he turned around.

The count's right hand was clenched around Renta's throat.

"C . . . Count—"

His tongue twitched as he gasped for breath.

"What I meant was this: in battle, numbers offer the greatest advantage. There is no mistaking that. But that rule does not hold with creatures of the night. And lowlifes should not be counted among them."

"B-but—"

"And now, I shall disappear. But first, I must deal with them. Beginning with—this girl."

Suddenly, the count hurled Renta at Akane, who was motionless, the whites of her eyes showing.

They were both sent tumbling across the tatami.

Akane's eyes burned. The rosary had been torn off her neck when Renta had crashed into her.

Getting up slowly, she looked around and her eyes stopped on Daigo.

"So . . . you came for me, Daigo-sama . . ."

Daigo groaned inside. Although the voice belonged to a different girl, the monotone and chilling way she spoke, and the lust in her voice, was exactly the same way Takako had spoken.

Was it too late? Had Akane turned into a vampire?

"Count Dracula!" Daigo unleashed an angry shout at the giant man before him.

But Akane said something unexpected. "You cut off my beloved's arm. . . . you will pay."

Daigo stared at Renta who still lay on the floor.

The count had not been the one to drink Akane's blood. It had been Renta.

The realization hit Daigo.

When he had accompanied Akane to the count's mansion, they had passed by a coach and driver. That had been *Renta.* He must have set his sights on Akane then— Then maybe . . .

The one who had sucked his mother's blood had not been Dracula, but . . . ?

As his mind raced from one thought to the next, the beautiful demoness was threatening him.

Daigo recognized the indescribable sadness in Akane's eyes. He had known that she had feelings for him.

An unnaturally white hand, seemingly not of this world, reached out and wrapped itself around Daigo's neck.

Her white face and bloodshot eyes and rose-colored lips drew closer.

"I hate you . . . you hateful man . . . but . . . I . . . love you. . . . Before I became like this . . . I couldn't tell you how I felt . . . but . . . as I am now . . . I love you . . . Daigo . . . more than anyone. . . . If someone is going to . . . drink your blood . . . let it be me. . . ."

Her lips parted, and the sharp fangs glared.

Daigo could feel her hot breath above the artery in his neck.

In that instant, Akane threw her head back without a sound.

"Akane-san!"

The dagger stuck in her back touched Daigo's hand, which held her.

"You bastard!" Renta had gotten up and shouted, "I won't let you. I won't let the woman I love kiss anyone else but me. Perish! You shall perish!"

Still in Daigo's arms, Akane raised her head. Perhaps her impending death had rid her body of the vampire's curse; now she looked like the cheerful tomboy Daigo had known.

Tears welled up in her black eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

"Daigo-sama . . . I have always . . ."

Her body became suddenly heavy.

Daigo thought of his mother, Takako, and Akane.

All the people who loved him had died. How many more must die?

"Oh, we have more guests," said the count.

Two shadows came in from the opening, which used to be closed before the count had kicked the shutter down. It was Kanô Jigorô and Saigô Shirô, each holding a lamp and crucifix in his hands.

Turning the light on the room, Jigorô asked, "Are you all right, Minazuki-kun?"

"Yes." Daigo's voice sounded empty, hardly cheered by the arrival of his two allies. "Sensei Kanô, what are you doing here?"

"We heard about the incident at Rokumeikan. When we returned to Shirô's house, a young yakuza type delivered your note about the count."

The incident at Rokumeikan?

A yakuza type?

Daigo turned and looked upon Tatsu's dead body.

"Yes, when we were drinking."

Right before they had set out for the Niizuka's house, Tatsu had told them to wait and had gone to the table where a group of young yakuza sat. They seemed to know each other, so he must have given them the note. He hadn't told Daigo, probably because he didn't want to be seen as needing help.

Tatsu-san, thank you.

Daigo looked at the two men, who were both already poised for a fight.

"Sensei, Saigô-kun, Chizuru-san is safe. But Akane-san and Takako-san are dead. That man drank their blood," Daigo said pointing at Renta.

"Don't move!' Renta threatened them with the Colt.

Having surveyed the scene, Jigorô now turned a cruel look toward the count.

"Look at what you have wrought," Jigorô said to Dracula. "Do you plan to sow the seeds of tragedy wherever you go? Is this some new way of unifying the people, Count Dracula—no, General Vlad?"

Without answering, the count moved to the right.

"Huh?"

The gun had changed hands from Renta to the evil man.

Clenching his fist, the count had crushed the steel mass as if it were made of paper.

3

“Count Dracula!?” A deathly look came over Renta.

“You are the fool who brought this upon us all. The punishment is yours to bear.”

The count’s chilling words signaled Renta’s doom. Before he could finish, Shirô ran forward.

Renta jumped to the left. Several objects came falling down out of the ceiling. Out of midair, he grabbed a sword—not a Japanese sword but something thinner and straighter—a fencing sword.

The man who had defeated the *Shitennô* of Renbei-jyuku—

“Shirô-kun, let me—”

Already poised to attack, Shirô shook his head. “No, I will.”

“But he has a sword.”

There was a saying, “Three times the degree of kendo.” It meant that for an unarmed martial artist to fight on equal ground against a fighter with a sword, he would need three times the skill. And this enemy was—

Shirô replied, “I. . . . had feelings for Akane-san.”

Then Daigo was not the one who should avenge Akane’s death.

“Come and get me!” Renta yelled.

The end of the sword jabbed at Shirô, who tried to advance. He jumped back, but another thrust came quickly at him. He could not find an opportunity to lunge inside his reach. Caught in a defensive battle, Shirô could only retreat.

However, watching his apprentice struggle, Jigorô only let out a satisfied grunt. *"Hm!"*

"Good going." Daigo smiled, as even the count had to nod his approval.

They had detected what was happening. Shirô was moving in the shape of an arc. Without his knowing, Renta was slowly being drawn into Shirô's circular movements, and the straightforward thrust of the sword began to miss its target by a greater and greater margin. Perhaps this was the difference between a natural-born prodigy and one who had only recently acquired his dark powers.

Shirô suddenly changed direction from right to left. It was a calculated move. For a second, the end of Renta's sword quivered with doubt.

"Kyehhh!" Renta moved with godlike speed.

Barely eluding the sword, which nicked him on the cheek, Shirô lunged inside.

Without a sound, he let out a sharp breath, as he unleashed the impenetrable *yama arashi.*

Hurtling in the air, Renta was unable to demonstrate a vampire's agility and crashed headfirst on the floor.

"Hrgghh . . ." He groaned as if all the air had been squeezed out of his lungs.

The blade of the fencing sword had penetrated the left side of his chest and broken off from the impact of the fall, even as Renta still held the other half in his hand.

Even a seasoned judo master would fall unconscious if he took the full force of *yama arashi*. But Renta got up.

His eyes burned red with a hellish hatred, and his canine teeth bit his trembling lips; his face no longer looked human.

Blood spurted out of his mouth.

"So this is the end. Stabbed in the heart . . . but I won't go alone. . . . The girl . . . will come with me."

Chizuru was lying by his feet.

Renta raised the broken sword in his left hand above his head. None of the three men was close enough to stop him.

He swung down, letting out a murderous scream.

The sword stopped.

An enormous man had grabbed Renta by the hair from behind, and fingers dug into the elbow of the hand that held the sword, stopping its motion.

"Count . . . Dracula . . . I—"

"You are nothing but a commoner," murmured Count Dracula. It was a declaration of contempt. "Such a cowardly man deserves to be pitched into a darkness deeper than the darkness of night."

The three men watched as he twisted Renta's neck completely around. The bones made a deep cracking sound. Then came a dull snap.

"You will have to forgive his offenses." He lifted Renta's severed head in their direction. Then the count cast it away into the yard. "So this is the endgame at last."

The tension ripped through the three men like an electrical current.

They had been struck by the presence of an overwhelming force more powerful than Renta's. The enemy now was the devil himself, who had lived more than four hundred years.

"I will take you on," challenged Jigorô, taking off his coat and jacket. He lowered his body into a defensive stance.

Seeing this, the count growled, "Well . . . you have a murderous air no less than that of this young man's father. Hm. I will be no match for you unarmed. So . . ."

The count's eyes shot out a fiery look, which pierced one of the three men.

The tension lifted from Shirô's body.

"Shirô!"

Shocked, Jigorô and Daigo stared at the two crimson orbs, which began to glow.

They were Shirô's eyes.

It was Renta who had attacked Akane. However, the vampire who drank Shirô's blood had been the count.

"First you will fight my apprentice." The count smiled viciously. "Go, Shirô."

"Shirô, wait." Jigorô tried to stop him.

A vampire count and the esteemed judo master . . . Whose apprentice was Shirô?

"Shirô!" The count's voice rumbled, as he urged Shirô on.

"Shirô," Jigorô called out to him calmly.

Shirô closed his eyes. Two masters . . . as he was commanded by these two strong minds, the young judo prodigy was deeply confused.

"Ohhhh!" Holding his head, he leaned forward.

He stopped howling.

Slowly, he raised his face. His eyes glowed red.

"Shirô-kun."

Whether he had heard Daigo's voice was unknown. He turned in Jigorô's direction instead.

"Sensei Kanô . . . I would like a match . . . with you."

"Shirô-kun."

Unexpectedly, a hand stopped Daigo, who had started to intervene.

"Sensei Kanô!?"

"If this is what Shirô wants, I will test him. Shirô, come."

Jigorô took up a fighting stance.

"I am glad."

The two stood motionless.

Daigo realized that this was not a fair match. Shirô intended to throw his master and kill him. He could tell from the murderous air about him. And Jigorô as well.

Under normal circumstances, Shirô was still not Jigorô's equal. However, he had acquired a vampire's powers. . . .

A vampire's speed.

The moment Jigorô tried to get around to the left, Shirô lunged inside Jigorô's reach.

A vampire's agility.

The two bodies switched positions, and Jigorô lowered his body. It was the Sensei's ippon-zeoi, but Shirô twisted his body in the air. He landed softly on the tatami like a cat.

A vampire's strength.

Without allowing him the chance to return to his fighting stance, Jigorô grabbed Shiro by the collar. A judo master could easily grip more than 220 pounds in one hand.

Yet Shirô threw off Jigorô's grip with both hands. The sound of ripping cloth. Jigorô had torn off Shirô's collar.

And then . . .

Before Jigorô could make another move, Shirô attacked. Jigorô's right arm was pushed down by the sleeve and elbow, and Shirô's torso bent forward as his right leg kicked up Jigorô's right leg. It was the legendary move Saigô Shirô had invented: the *yama arashi*.

Jigorô was hurled in the air and crashed through the shutters and into the yard, unable to cushion his fall.

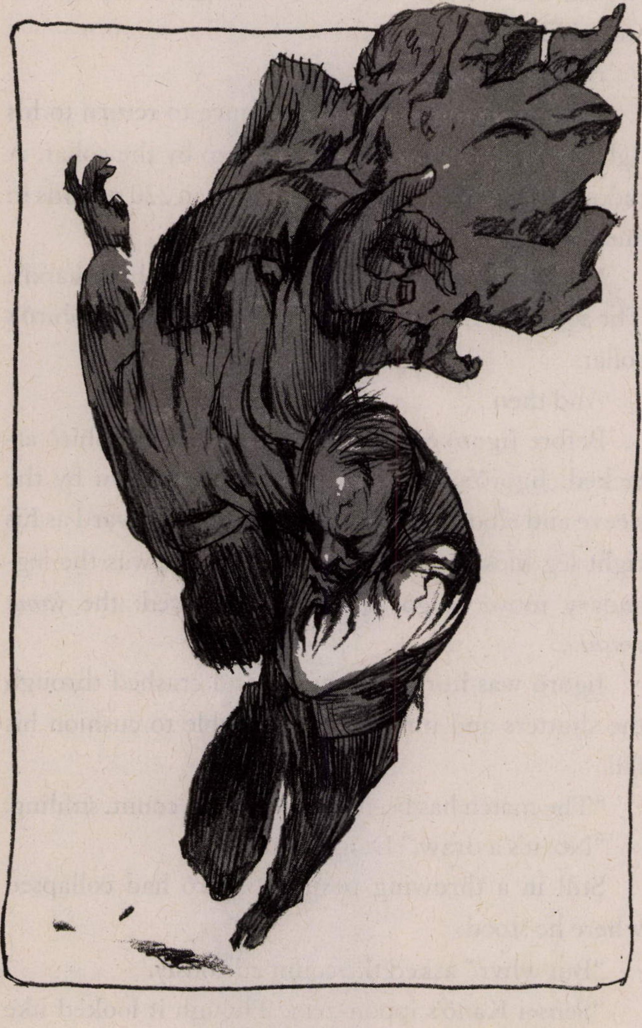
"The match has been won," said the count, smiling.

"No, it's a draw," Daigo countered.

Still in a throwing position, Shirô had collapsed where he stood.

"But why?" asked the count curiously.

"Sensei Kanô's ippon-zeoi. Though it looked like



Shirô-kun absorbed it, nevertheless, he still felt it. You might think of it as the ground colliding with his legs where he landed."

"Hm, the Japanese martial arts are very profound. A draw, even with the help of a vampire's powers. Impressive. Maybe I will take him with me, as a replacement for your mother."

A lightning bolt struck Daigo. "My mother . . . did you . . ."

The count said quietly, "Yes, it was I who drank your mother's blood. She chased after me, wanting to return the gold I had given her. We argued on the street, and I saw her white throat. I won't go on. I was your mother's enemy."

Daigo raised his lowered sword and pointed it between the count's eyes. Something hot began to well up from inside him.

"Will you avenge your mother's death? I will not run."

He could think of nothing else. Daigo thought only of striking down the man before him. His left leg felt hot and heavy.

His throat burned as he started to lunge. He coughed violently. A jolt of pain shot through the wound every time he coughed. Falling on one knee, he let out another cough—and something else.

Looking down upon the blood spreading over the tatami, the count said, "Tuberculosis. With that body, you won't live through another month . . . much less defeat me in battle. Your name was Daigo, wasn't it? You have but one way to get your revenge on me."

Daigo raised his head, still coughing.

The count said in a near whisper, "Join my family. Then you will have eternal life . . . and an eternity in which to kill me."

"I—I won't become a vampire . . . like you." He barely squeezed out the words, as he felt all his energy leaving him at the same time. Daigo knew the end was near.

Mother, am I to kill this man?

Even if it means turning into a vampire . . . ?

Daigo's eyes opened wide from the shock of looking inside his soul.

Do I really want to become a vampire?

"You must live." The count's voice seemed close and far to Daigo's ears. "A life in darkness . . . tortured by eternal hunger and thirst . . . yet, you may come to see things you might not in your mortal life. About humanity and the way of the sword."

"Stop it!" He lashed out with his sword.

Out of the sword's reach, the count laughed soundlessly.

"Even in your condition, you don't seem to understand. Very well. I suppose yours is one way to live. Then I shall go.

"But I'm a bit thirsty now. I'm taking this girl with me."

Taking Chizuru in his arms, he dropped down lightly into the yard.

"Wait . . ." Daigo wanted to stop him, but he could not even form the words.

"I will set sail from this city's port. If you change your mind, come after me. If you are still able."

The voice faded into the distance.

As Daigo desperately tried to stand up, several shadows threatened from all directions. It was Niizuka and his wife and their two helpers. The vampires still remained.

Eight white arms reached out at Daigo.

"Our legs."

"How dare you cut them offfff!"

Again, Daigo fell into a fit of coughing. But it was not his illness that had caused it.

Suddenly, wafting in the air was the strong scent of garlic.

"Daigo-san."

It was Shirô who had run to his side. He was indeed young, having already recovered from being thrown by Jigorô. He and Jigorô had brought along garlic powder, one of the most important weapons with which to fight a vampire.

"Did you hear that . . . Shirô-kun? Dracula . . . will try to escape from Tokyo Bay. . . . We must go after him."

"Not in your condition."

"Speaking of which . . . you're also in danger. If we don't kill Dracula . . . you'll have to live as an accomplice to that devil . . . and do as he orders."

"But—"

"Go after him. And . . . kill Dracula . . . that's the only way you'll be human . . . again. Besides . . . you must go save Chizuru-san."

"I understand. But what about . . . ?"

Shirô turned a cruel look at the four shadows writhing on the tatami.

"Go outside and check on Sensei Kanô. . . . I will . . . dispose of them."

That night, many passersby witnessed a gigantic black dog running down the Tokyo streets. It was said that the creature was nearly seven feet in length, and its eyes burned like coals.

The witnesses' reports that a girl in a gorgeous party dress had been lying on top of the dog, however, had only discredited their accounts altogether, instead of rousing up concern for the girl.

4

October 4, 188–, 5:00 A.M.
Tokyo Bay

When the coach arrived at Tokyo Bay, the city was still shrouded in darkness.

The coach was the same one Dracula had stolen from the Rokumeikan. Inside were the dying Daigo and also Jigorô.

"Damn, where is he?" Shirô sat in the driver's seat, grinding his teeth.

"He will have to set sail before the sun rises. That gives him barely thirty minutes," said Jigorô.

"There are too many ships. . . . The port is too big." Daigo's voice already sounded like a dead man's.

He had stabbed his mother, who had been turned into a vampire, with his own hands, killed Takako, and seen Akane die in his arms. A cold wind swirled inside his lonely eyes.

"We should drive along the edge of the bay. Somehow we must find him. Shirô, please hurry."

"Yes," Shirô answered, giving the horses a flick of the whip.

"Please let me off here," Daigo said.

"What?" Jigorô's face clouded with suspicion.

"I have the feeling . . . the count will show himself . . . if I am alone. Let me off, please. If I find them, I'll blow the whistle."

He was referring to the small whistle the police often used when chasing down suspects. In the case of these three men, they were on the hunt for the count.

After considering it, Jigorô said, "All right." Then turning to the window, he called out, "Shirô, stop the coach."

Daigo jumped out of the coach with only a sword in his hand.

Jigorô warned him to be careful and to not forget the whistle, and then the coach rumbled away.

Daigo began to walk. He had no clue where to look. One foot just followed the other. That was all.

After Daigo advanced seventeen to twenty feet away from the edge of the wharf, he stopped.

There was a black ship just ahead.

A ladder had been laid across to the stern, and the count was standing in front of it, carrying Chizuru in his arms.

"You made it. Don't worry. This lady is still human, like you."

"Why . . . didn't you board the ship?" Daigo asked in a raspy voice.

"I was waiting for you," said the count. "Come with me. It would be a pity to lose a man like you. We can continue our night travels together with this young lady."

Laying Chizuru gently on the ground, the count stepped toward Daigo.

"It's just as well you come. But if you insist on bearing a grudge based on human pride, then stab me in the heart with that sword. Perhaps it is my destiny that my life of four hundred years should end right here. But I encourage you to try to imagine another destiny for both of us. Maybe you will be able to change this cursed blood." The count's voice echoed strangely, coldly in Daigo's head.

It was a powerful temptation that Daigo found hard to resist.

A cursed life of eternity.

Or the fleeting life of a human.

Which will you choose, Daigo?

"I . . . ," Daigo uttered, " . . . am human."

His blade rose.

The count did not move.

A steam whistle blew in the far distance. A hint of sunrise began to ripple like water in the eastern sky.

The dying man advanced . . . to deliver death to the man who was waiting for it.

Five minutes later, worried for Daigo's safety, Shirô and Jigorô returned to the place Daigo had gotten off.

When Shirô stopped the coach, he grabbed his chest and groaned.

"What's the matter?" Jigorô asked, opening the door.

"Just now, it felt like a knife stabbed my chest. . . ." He felt his neck with his hand, and shouted, "Sensei, the teeth marks are gone!"

"Shirô, look."

Shirô focused on the point where Jigorô was pointing.

A black shadow of a ship was pulling away from the wharf.

"Sensei, could that be the count's vessel?"

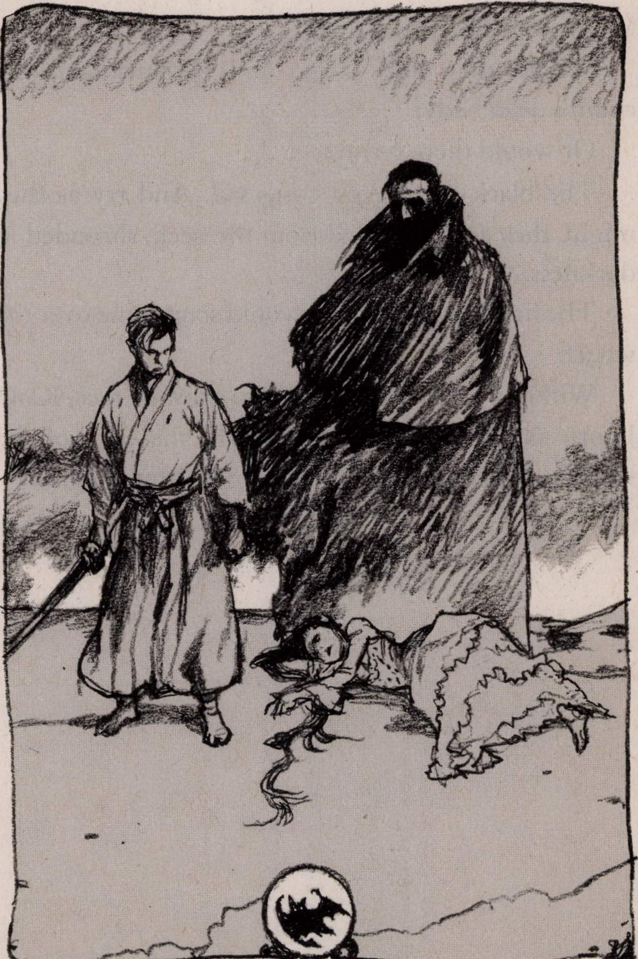
"I'm certain of it."

"Then what about Daigo-san and Chizuru-san?"

"We'll look for them."

"Yes."

The two men came down from the coach.



The wharf had sunk into the depths of darkness. What would they find there?

Would they find Daigo and Chizuru and the count's dead body?

Or would there be no one. . . .

The black ship was setting sail. And try as they might, they could not make out the deck, shrouded in darkness.

The first glow of sunrise would soon come over the wharf.

Without waiting for the sun to show its face, Kanô Jigorô and Saigô Shirô ran toward the edge of the wharf where the black vessel had just been moored.

AFTERWORD

It all began with a British horror film, barely ninety minutes long, called *Dracula* (1958).

When I saw it for the first time, I was in the fifth grade. I was completely taken by the film, possessed just as if a vampire had drunk my blood.

Playing the part of Count Dracula was Christopher Lee, who is still featured in many films today, most notably in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Lee's Dracula was such a hit that the film spawned several sequels. The final film in the series was *The Satanic Rites of Dracula* (1974). Honestly, it was a flop, and it had been too heavily influenced by the action-packed spy movies so popular at the time, but still I was drawn to its portrayal of Dracula that was so completely different from the way the character had been portrayed before.

In the film, Lee's Dracula is the CEO of big a corporation who tries to create a biological weapon that will wipe out all humankind. That was all well and fine (Actually not. Has the vampire no pride?), but Dracula's unusual motive was a refreshing twist on the old story.

Toward the end of the movie, Count Dracula's eternal adversary, Dr. Van Helsing, denounces him: "You want to destroy humankind just so you can put an end to your cursed life."

In other words, Dracula had grown weary of immortality.

It was a sign of weakness. Or a kind of sadness. This was what I focused on . . . perhaps a person who had become tired of eternal life might envy mortals.

Perhaps he might love those mortals who lived their fleeting lives passionately and to their fullest.

In Bram Stoker's original *Dracula,* Dracula is based on Vlad Ţepeş (Vlad the Impaler), a real historical figure who was a military general in fifteenth-century Transylvania. This was something I retained in my own novel. In which case, the one who could win Dracula's affection could only be himself a warrior.

This was how Minazuki Daigo was born.

It was the middle of the Meiji era, a time when the once-obsolete Japanese martial arts were finally experiencing a revival. If everything had gone smoothly, Daigo might have established his own school and might even have become a master swordsman for the modern age.

However, he could not accomplish those things because a different, more violent destiny awaited him. I hope you'll be able to imagine what that destiny was from the novel's ending.

The battle between Daigo and Dracula was not meant to be depicted simply as a battle between a human being and a devil, but was rooted in something more fundamental.

I believe humans are not alone in this world, so I tried to depict a battle with a being that is not human. Although I still don't know what awaits at the conclusion of this battle, I think that any reader of the novel can tell which outcome I desire most.

Also, I deviated a bit from historical fact to make the story more entertaining. For example, the judo versus jujitsu tournament organized by the Tokyo Police Department, which Saigô Shirô won, actually took place after the time period of the novel. The detail about how Kanô Jigorô studied medicine, although it's entirely possible that he did dabble in it, is also a fabrication. Please forgive those liberties.

I'm pleased with how this novel turned out. I hope you enjoy it.

October 2004,
while watching *Love at First Bite* (1979),
Hideyuki Kikuchi

GLOSSARY

cho: A traditional Japanese unit of measure, equal to about 120 yards.

dan: A grade or level of proficiency in kendo.

hakama: Long, pleated trousers resembling a skirt with a slit up the front. It is part of the kendo uniform; it was also commonly worn by scholars and students.

ippon: In martial arts, a decisive attack from which an opponent cannot recover.

ippon-zeoi: A one-armed, over-the-shoulder throw. The martial artist executes it by grabbing his opponent's outstretched arm, placing it on his shoulder, and then throwing the opponent.

jo (or jyô): A traditional Japanese unit of measure, equivalent to about three yards.

jyuku: A school.

ken: A traditional Japanese unit of measure, equivalent to about six feet.

kiai: A concept common to the practice of many martial arts. It is a yell that's meant not only to intimidate an opponent, but also to focus the warrior's spirit and energy.

nabe: A hot pot dish, containing sliced beef, cabbage, shiitake mushrooms, and other vegetables.

reppû: The literal translation for this martial arts attack is "violent wind."

ryu: A school or style of martial arts.

seigan: A stance in kendo in which the martial artist holds the sword at about mid-level with its tip pointed at the opponent's eyes.

shaku: A traditional Japanese unit of measure, equivalent to about 11.8 inches.

Shitennô: Literally, "The Big Four." This term is used to refer to the four most skilled people in a dojo, military unit, or any similar group.

shoji: A sliding door or screen made of paper.

shuriken: A ninja weapon. It's a throwing star, usually with four blades.

tsubo: A traditional Japanese unit of measure, equivalent to about four square yards.

yakuza: Although this word is most often used to refer to the modern Japanese mafia, it can also be used to describe any gangster or violent thug.

yama arashi: Literally, "mountain storm." It was a judo throw that the historical Saigo Shiro made famous.

About the Author

Hideyuki Kikuchi is one of Japan's most popular horror novelists. His novel series, *Vampire Hunter D,* which was adapted into a classic animated film, has won him a devoted fan following in the United States.

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